



# **A Community Response to Homelessness in Albuquerque**

2013 – 2017



## **Table of Contents**

Executive Summary .....	3
Overview of Homelessness .....	8
Goal 1 – Increase Access to Stable and Affordable Housing .....	10
Goal 2: Improve Health and Stability .....	14
Goal 3: Increase Economic Security .....	17
Goal 4: Rebuild the Homeless Crisis Response System.....	21
Goal 5 – Build the Community and Political Will Needed to End Homelessness .....	23
Implementation.....	25
Appendix A.....	28

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## **Executive Summary**

For over two decades, communities all over the United States have struggled with homelessness. Yet, we are confident that we now know what it takes to end homelessness and that now is the time to take advantage of promising new research and emerging models that show us how we can do so.

*A Community Response to Homelessness* was first developed and released in 2007. The Plan established a five year strategy for launching this new approach. *A Community Response to Homelessness* was based on the fact that Albuquerque leaders and voters had put forth policies, resources and a will (ingness) that demonstrated the potential to implement an integrated, focused, multi-sectoral, and effective response to homelessness.

Our original Plan recognized that more traditional attempts to address homelessness had largely been piecemeal, focused on emergency responses and designed to manage the problem, rather than solve it. With the number of people experiencing homelessness as great today as ever, many of us felt an erosion of hope. Yet promising approaches both in Albuquerque and throughout the country provided a solid reason to have renewed hope that ending homelessness *is possible*.

In 2012, the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness convened a group of stakeholders to update *A Community Response to Homelessness*. This happened through a series of monthly meetings during 2012, a day-long planning meeting in March 2013 and a Community Forum in May 2013. The result, *A Community Response to Homelessness 2013-2017*, builds from the success of our original plan.

In our updated Plan, we commit to **a shared vision to make homelessness in Albuquerque rare, short-lived and non-recurring**. We continue to believe that Albuquerque has the opportunity to be at the forefront in the effort to end homelessness. This is our call to action to end homelessness in our community. It invites broad participation from citizens, businesses, policy-makers, service providers, law enforcement, government officials, neighborhoods, and community leaders. It calls for better investment of more resources. And it integrates what is already working with what can work and is working in other communities.

The solutions identified in this Plan rest on a few key principles:

- We can **eliminate homelessness**.
- Homelessness **harms all of us**.
- Inaction **costs our community**.
- Ending homelessness **takes all of us**.
- **Albuquerque can be a leader** in ending homelessness, leading the way at a local level.
- Yet, a **strong federal commitment** is also critical.
- We can view homelessness from different perspectives and still build a **shared vision** toward ending it.
- **Now's the time!**

There are also a few key beliefs underlying this Plan:

- The root cause of homelessness is **poverty**.
- People who experience homelessness are **diverse**.
- Homelessness is the **combined result of structural inadequacies and personal characteristics or circumstances** that make some people more vulnerable than others.
- During the last twenty-five years, **we have learned valuable lessons** that can be applied to what works locally.
- **Albuquerque has the talented leaders/people, resources, and compassion to make this happen.**

There are five critical broad goals we must achieve if we are to have a significant impact on homelessness in our community. These are: 1) Increase access to safe, high quality and affordable housing; 2) Improve health and stability; 3) Increase economic security; 4) Rebuild the homeless crisis response system; 5) Create the community and political will needed to end homelessness. These goals are in alignment with the Opening Doors, the federal plan to end homelessness that was released in 2010.

### **Goal 1: Increase Access to Safe, High Quality and Affordable Housing**

The elimination of homelessness requires an adequate supply of safe, affordable and decent housing. Currently in Albuquerque, loss of affordable housing stock, combined with limited capacity among nonprofit organizations to develop housing, few resources for affordable housing development, and barriers to housing access for low-income residents all create significant obstacles to increasing the availability of affordable housing.

We recommend that Albuquerque adopt a “Housing First” approach, where the first priority in helping homeless individuals and families is helping them find safe, affordable housing. We know from local experience that a Housing First approach is an effective approach to helping homeless families and individuals obtain and remain in permanent housing. We hope to build on this commitment to a Housing First approach and extend it to all people who experience homelessness.

#### **Objective 1: Increase access to safe, high quality and affordable housing**

- **Strategy 1:** Support efforts to create stronger, healthier neighborhoods, particularly those neighborhoods where much of the affordable housing stock is located.
- **Strategy 2:** Develop relationships with landlords to increase their willingness to rent to people who have experienced homelessness.

#### **Objective 2: Develop a balanced housing and services approach for all people experiencing homelessness**

- **Strategy 1:** Develop a network of wrap-around services for those who have obtained housing so they can stay housed
- **Strategy 2:** Develop system-wide indicators for measuring housing success and stability

#### **Objective 3: Increase the supply of safe, high quality, affordable housing**

- **Strategy 1:** Increase local, state and federal funding for affordable housing

- **Strategy 2:** Increase local, state and federal funding for eviction prevention assistance
- **Strategy 3:** Engage the private sector, including the private housing sector, in increasing the supply of affordable housing

## **Goal 2: Improve Health and Stability**

For people to obtain and remain in housing requires a wide range of services, medical care and resources. Many people manage just fine with little external support most of the time, but some may need additional help through short-term, emergency crises. Other people need long-term, ongoing support. Existing support services in Albuquerque are highly fragmented and long-term services are under-funded. Moreover, homeless services and more community-based services designed for housed populations are not well connected, making it difficult for people to navigate multiple services. Most people experiencing homelessness do not have access to affordable medical care.

The good news is that we know what types of services and supports help people stay housed, and we have many strong programs in Albuquerque. In addition, the expansion of Medicaid to all adults under 133% of the federal poverty level in 2014 will create new opportunities to connect homeless individuals and families to the supportive services, behavioral health care and medical care they need to obtain and remain in housing.

### **Objective 1: Improve access to medical and behavioral health care**

- **Strategy 1:** As Medicaid is expanded to all adults living in poverty, ensure that people who experience homelessness obtain Medicaid
- **Strategy 2:** Strengthen the network of medical and behavioral health providers through coordination and collaboration
- **Strategy 3:** Train medical and behavioral health providers in the needs of people experiencing homelessness
- **Strategy 4:** Identify gaps and needs in existing medical and behavioral health services

### **Objective 2: Strengthen and sustain access to comprehensive supportive services**

- **Strategy 1:** Improve existing supportive services resources through training in effective recovery-based practices and services
- **Strategy 2:** Prioritize resources for supportive services that can help people gain and remain in housing

## **Goal 3: Improve Economic Security**

Inadequate household income is a primary factor in the growing number of people who experience homelessness. Many working people in Albuquerque, even those who work 40 hours a week or more, do not earn enough money to afford safe and adequate housing. People receiving disability benefits because they cannot work often cannot afford even the lowest market rentals, because disability benefits are so low. For those qualified for disability or other financial assistance, enrolling in public programs is often complex. Completing a successful application requires access to a certain level of skills and resources and can take years, keeping people from receiving the income they need to maintain their housing or exit homelessness.

Our success with the SOAR initiative, which is a model for helping homeless people with disabilities quickly obtain federal disability benefits, shows we can help people obtain needed benefits when we are strategic and targeted. The fact that voters increased the minimum wage in fall 2012 shows that Albuquerque residents recognize that low-income working families need to earn a decent wage. We believe we can build off these successes to improve economic security for those experiencing homelessness.

**Objective 1: Increase Albuquerque’s minimum wage so that it is equal to or greater than the housing wage**

- **Strategy 1:** Partner with groups working to increase the minimum wage in Albuquerque
- **Strategy 2:** Develop business champions

**Objective 2: Increase access to high wage/high skill jobs**

- **Strategy 1:** Increase the capacity of homeless services agencies to provide job skills and training
- **Strategy 2:** Advocate to change the state’s child care subsidy policy so that the child care subsidy slowly phases out as parents’ increase their income
- **Strategy 3:** Improve the public transportation system in Albuquerque (i.e. more comprehensive holiday/weekend schedule, extended hours, bus stops near services locations)
- **Strategy 4:** Advocate to allow GED classes to count towards TANF work/education requirements
- **Strategy 5:** Collaborate with existing economic development initiatives to assist with employment

**Objective 3: Increase access to mainstream resources**

- **Strategy 1:** Improve relationships with the Social Security Administration and Human Services Department Income Supportive Division.
- **Strategy 2:** Increase resources for SOAR, particularly funding for SOAR representatives
- **Strategy 3:** Eliminate barriers in entitlement programs that make it difficult for people to access or keep these benefits

**Goal 4: Rebuild the Homeless Crisis Response System**

In order to end homelessness in Albuquerque, those experiencing homelessness and those who are at high risk of becoming homeless must be able to quickly access the help they need. Currently it can be difficult and frustrating for people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness to access the help they need to quickly exit or avoid homelessness.

**Objective 1: Increase Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Resources**

- **Strategy 1:** Increase local, state and federal funding for prevention and rapid rehousing

**Objective 2: Develop a centralized or coordinated assessment system**

- **Strategy 1:** Identify funding resources
- **Strategy 2:** Increase and maximize utilization of the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), particularly as a tool for identifying when and where there are open beds

- **Strategy 3:** Engage in system mapping so we know what housing resources are available and how people access them
- **Strategy 4:** Strengthen collaboration between agencies
- **Strategy 5:** Develop a standardized vulnerability index and assessment tool in order to help target and prioritize the right resources to the right person. These tools should account for the needs of different subpopulations.

### **Goal 5: Build the Community & Political Will Needed to End Homelessness**

We must build strong community support for policies and programs that can end homelessness. A strong committed community mobilized to end homelessness will provide our leaders with the support they need to take bold steps forward. Without this show of community support, homelessness may not be considered a serious enough problem to necessitate an urgent, coordinated response and the number of people experiencing homelessness will continue to grow. Our goals are designed to tap into the caring, creative energy of our community so that we can continue to implement solutions to end homelessness.

Albuquerque Heading Home is a public-private initiative to identify and house the most medically vulnerable chronically homeless people in Albuquerque. Albuquerque Heading Home has been successful largely due to the ongoing support of Mayor Richard Berry, who has served as a champion for the initiative. Albuquerque Heading Home shows what is possible when a diverse set of stakeholders, with the leadership of a strong champion, come together to address homelessness.

#### **Objective 1: Educate key stakeholders and elected officials about homelessness**

- **Strategy 1:** Develop ongoing relationships with elected officials and other key stakeholders
- **Strategy 2:** Engage Albuquerque's Mayor as a champion in ending homelessness

#### **Objective 2: Develop a public information campaign to educate the general public about homelessness**

- **Strategy 1:** Create a growing network from the public and private sector that support the mission
- **Strategy 2:** Engage professional support in public education and media efforts
- **Strategy 3:** Develop a "motto" or catchy phrase for public information about homelessness
- **Strategy 4:** Engage Point-in-Time count volunteers
- **Strategy 5:** Provide pragmatic, concrete info on the public impact of homelessness

### **Implementation**

The Albuquerque Strategic Collaborative to End Homelessness will provide leadership in implementing *A Community Response to Homelessness*. The mission of the Albuquerque Strategic Collaborative to End Homelessness is to improve the system of care that exists in Albuquerque for people experiencing homelessness through collaborative, proactive planning. The New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness coordinates the Collaborative. *A Community Response to Homelessness* establishes several system-wide metrics to measure our progress in implementing the Plan.

## Overview of Homelessness

Homelessness in Albuquerque is a community problem that cannot be solved without a community-wide response; this document outlines a plan for formulating that response. This section provides a brief overview of the scope of homelessness in Albuquerque.

### *Who is affected by homelessness?*

Homelessness affects each of us whether through personal experience, interaction with those who are homeless, or through the costs that are born by the community as a whole. People from all facets of our community, with varying racial, ethnic, educational backgrounds and of varying ages, can and do experience homelessness. Increasingly families with children experience homelessness. Poverty is the most common factor among people who cannot afford safe shelter. Limited affordable housing, low wages, limited access to health care and an inadequate social safety net create precarious conditions for thousands of people in our community.

### *How is homelessness defined?*

**Homelessness** is a condition – not a class of people. It is the condition of people living outside of homes. When people do not have housing they live in shelters, on the streets, in their cars, in substandard motels, in tents, in abandoned buildings and/or doubled-up with friends and family.

### *How many Albuquerque residents do not have housing?*

In January 2013, we counted 1,170 people who were homeless on one night; this is called a **Point-in-Time (PIT) count**.<sup>1</sup> This number gives us a baseline estimate of the *minimum* number of people who were sleeping outside, in shelter or in transitional housing the night of our PIT count. It does not tell us how many people were staying in motels or doubled up with family or friends. Because we know many people, especially families and unaccompanied youth, are in this situation we know our PIT count is a significant undercount and the number of people experiencing homelessness in Albuquerque is actually much higher.

### *Is the number of people in Albuquerque experiencing homelessness increasing?*

We used a very similar methodology for our 2013 and 2011 PIT Counts. It is valid, therefore, to compare the two counts. Our 2013 PIT count counted 469 fewer people than our 2011 PIT count.

#### **Homelessness:**

Homelessness is a condition – not a class of people. It is the condition of living outside of homes. When people can't access housing they live in shelters, on the streets, in their cars, in substandard motels, in tents, in abandoned buildings and doubled-up with friends and family.

#### **Point-In-Time**

**Count:** The Point in Time Count is a count of the number of people who are experiencing homelessness in Albuquerque during one specific night. Past point-in-time counts have been conducted by counting people and counting people when they access services.

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<sup>1</sup> 2013 Albuquerque Point-in-Time Count

**2011 PIT count vs. 2013 PIT count**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Sheltered</b>	<b>Unsheltered</b>	<b>Total</b>
2011 PIT Count	1252	387	1639
2013 PIT Count	1027	134	1170

This decrease suggests that our efforts to address homelessness over the last several years are having an impact. However, it is important to consider other factors as well. As discussed above, we know that homeless youth and homeless families with children are often doubled-up with family or friends, often in unsafe, overcrowded and unstable living situations. We also know that homeless families often stay in substandard motels. But people in these two situations were not included in our count; therefore we did not capture changes in homelessness rates among those living in motels or doubled-up. Finally, while we used very similar methodologies in our 2011 and 2013, our methodology was not exactly the same. The differences in methodology may have led to less people taking the survey in 2013, which would mean less people would be counted. It is impossible to know for sure which factor or factors contributed to the decrease in homelessness and is therefore important to keep all factors in mind when comparing the 2011 and 2013 results.

***How much does homelessness cost us in terms of dollars?***

In Albuquerque, we spend an excess of \$20 million dollars annually to provide homeless services to individuals and families<sup>2</sup>. Homelessness also places a significant financial burden on hospitals and psychiatric facilities because we often must provide acute services for preventable conditions and situations which are exacerbated by the circumstances of homelessness. In addition, people experiencing homelessness often spend time in jail for minor violations and for performing activities in public, such as sleeping, that are not considered criminal when performed in private.

It is also important to remember that in addition to monetary costs there are significant social costs to homelessness. We are all affected when members of our community, including single adults, children, parents, teenagers and the elderly, do not have a place to live.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on federal Continuum of Care grant funds and leveraged resources. This figure is significantly underestimated because it does not include expenditures by churches, privately funded programs or emergency shelter services.

## **Goal 1 – Increase Access to Safe, High Quality and Affordable Housing**

**In order to end homelessness Albuquerque needs an adequate supply of affordable housing.**

Decent, safe, affordable housing is the number one need of persons who are homeless. Homelessness is on the rise in large part because the availability of affordable housing is declining. The best way to reduce homelessness in Albuquerque is by creating new affordable housing.

This nationwide realization in recent years that housing must be “first” represents a paradigm shift in addressing homelessness. For many years, Albuquerque, like other communities, had been developing a homeless service network based on the “Continuum of Care” model promoted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This model suggests that an individual must move through a continuum of services (outreach/intake/assessment, emergency shelter, transitional housing and services and permanent housing) in order to be successful in exiting homelessness. Unfortunately, this service model has done little to reduce the number of people who experience homelessness in Albuquerque.

In response, a new model to address homelessness has emerged. This new model, called **Housing First**, seeks to first and foremost place homeless individuals and families in decent, safe, affordable housing. Once the basic need of shelter has been met, individuals and families can then focus on addressing issues that led to their loss of housing. Often they may need additional supportive services to remain in housing. However, evidence from across the country and in Albuquerque has shown that these services are more effective once individuals are living in stable, safe housing.

The City of Albuquerque created a Housing First program in 2005, which has been very successful in helping people who are chronically homeless obtain and remain in permanent housing. The success of this model in Albuquerque creates a basis for expanding the Housing First approach to include all people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless. Expanding the Housing First approach requires a firm commitment from funders, service providers, policy-makers and elected officials to housing as the first priority in helping people who experience homelessness.

While a Housing First approach should guide future homelessness policy in Albuquerque, several issues related to affordable housing will need to be addressed in order for such an approach to be successful. Private sector developers, contractors, landlords, investors, and foundations can play a key role in addressing the affordable housing issue. Creating an adequate amount of affordable

**Housing First:** A nationwide model that seeks to place homeless individuals and families in housing first and then meet their various needs with supportive services that help to keep them in housing. The Housing First model contrasts with previous efforts in that it does not require an individual to move through a continuum of services (outreach/intake/assessment, emergency shelter, transitional housing and services) in order access housing.

housing for all Albuquerque residents involves a two-pronged approach. One approach is to increase the amount of **tenant based rental assistance** available to low-income families and individuals. The other approach is to increase the physical stock of affordable housing for low-income families and individuals. The issues and challenges associated with both approaches in Albuquerque are discussed in more detail below.

**Issue #1: There is a shortage of housing that is affordable to low-income and very low-income Albuquerque households.**

In particular, there is a significant need for more housing units that are affordable to **households earning less than 30 percent of area median income**. People with very low incomes are particularly vulnerable to high housing costs and, as a result, are much more likely to become homeless. Sixty-four percent of renters that make less than \$10,000 per year and 80 percent of renters that make \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year paid more than 35% of their income towards housing costs.<sup>3</sup>

**Issue # 2: There are limited local, state and federal resources available to address the affordable housing shortage.**

There are several local, state and federal programs that create affordable housing for very low-income households who are either homeless or at high risk of homelessness. These include the Albuquerque Workforce Housing Trust Fund, the New Mexico Housing Trust Fund, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grants, HOME, Low Income Housing Tax Credit, Housing Choice Voucher Program, Public Housing, and Continuum of Care programs.

However, these programs have never been funded at a sufficient level to fully meet the need for safe, affordable rental housing in Albuquerque. More recently, funding for most of these programs has actually been reduced. HOME has been cut by 40% and Community Development Block Grants have been cut by 21%. The Continuum of Care program, which provides transitional and permanent supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness, will probably have to absorb a four to eight percent cut in 2013. The NM Housing Trust Fund has only received \$3.5 million in new funding since 2010. And in 2013, the City of Albuquerque reduced its investment in the Workforce Housing Trust Fund by 75% from 2011.

**Tenant Based Rental Assistance:**

Tenant based rental assistance provides assistance to renters in the form of vouchers. With a voucher, a tenant is able to choose his/her own housing and is not limited to a particular housing development.

**Affordable Housing:**

The standard for affordability established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines housing as affordable if a household pays no more than 30 percent of their income to retain such housing.

**Supportive Housing:**

Supportive housing is housing linked with social services tailored to the needs of the population being housed. Supportive services can be either on-site or off-site.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011 American Community Survey, Table B25074

Public housing and House Choice Voucher Section 8 waiting lists are severe. As of April 2013, there were 5,000 qualified applicants on these waiting lists at the Albuquerque Housing Authority and the average wait time is 3 years to get into these units for those households that meet one of Albuquerque Housing Authority's preference criteria. For those who don't fit one of the preference criteria, the wait can be even longer.

**Issue #3: Many low-income residents face barriers to accessing available public and private affordable housing.**

In the private rental market, landlords have a responsibility to ensure a safe living environment for their tenants and their neighborhoods. Private landlords are subject to various rules and regulations (including the Fair Housing Act, Nuisance Abatement Ordinance, zoning regulations and requirements imposed by investors) that have led them to adopt strict standards for screening of potential tenants. Consequently, such standards and procedures often pose a barrier for residents with criminal backgrounds, poor rental histories, and poor credit histories. Other barriers may exist for many low-income residents, including an inability to come up with the required damage deposit or first and last month's rent. In a 2007 survey of people experiencing homelessness in Albuquerque, 27 percent of respondents reported that not having enough money for a security deposit posed a major obstacle to exiting homelessness<sup>4</sup>. People with disabilities may have trouble finding available accessible housing due to a shortage of supply and in some cases, because of subtle discrimination that prohibits them from finding appropriate affordable housing.

Based on the issues identified above, this Plan establishes the following objectives and strategies to increase access to safe, affordable housing.

**Objective 1: Increase access to safe, high quality and affordable housing**

- **Strategy 1:** Support efforts to create stronger, healthier neighborhoods, particularly those neighborhoods where much of the affordable housing stock is located.
- **Strategy 2:** Develop relationships with landlords to increase their willingness to rent to people who have experienced homelessness.

**Objective 2: Develop a balanced housing and services approach for all people experiencing homelessness**

- **Strategy 1:** Develop a network of wrap-around services for those who have obtained housing so they can stay housed
- **Strategy 2:** Develop system-wide indicators for measuring housing success and stability

**Objective 3: Increase the supply of safe, high quality affordable housing**

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<sup>4</sup> Results of a Survey Conducted of People Experiencing Homelessness in Albuquerque, NM Coalition to End Homelessness, September 2007

- **Strategy 1:** Increase local, state and federal funding for affordable housing
- **Strategy 2:** Increase local, state and federal funding for eviction prevention assistance
- **Strategy 3:** Engage the private sector, including the private housing sector, in increasing the supply of affordable housing

## **Goal 2: Improve Health and Stability**

### **People need supports and services in order to obtain and remain in housing.**

People who experience homelessness need affordable housing. Many, although not all, also need some level of supportive services. The combination of affordable housing and supportive services can be the critical element in helping people experiencing homelessness find a place to live and in helping those who have a place to live remain in housing.

The degree to which people need to use services varies. Many individuals and families experience homelessness simply because they cannot afford housing and, for that reason, may primarily need assistance with accessing housing they can afford. Once housed in affordable housing, many may only need services in the case of a short-term, emergency crisis. Others, however, such as those with a disability or recurrent illness, may also need long-term case management support or wrap-around intensive services to help them maintain their housing. Across the country, research has shown that the combination of housing and services – often called **supportive housing** - keeps people housed, particularly for people who have been homeless for a long time and who have a disability.

Access to affordable medical care – including both physical health care and behavioral health care – is also critical to people’s health and stability. This can prevent an illness or injury from becoming a crisis that leads to loss of housing. Many also need access to affordable medical care in order to address a chronic illness or disability that contributed to their homelessness.

Creating such a system of supportive services and medical care will be one of the most challenging aspects of this plan. Existing services are fragmented and are driven by different forces, especially different missions and different means of allocating resources. To overcome the existing fragmentation of services will require a collaborative effort among all service providers, funding agencies, policy makers and community members to align existing services with a common mission of preventing and ending homelessness.

### **Issue #1: Albuquerque service agencies differ in how housing fits into their overall mission and how they define success.**

As discussed in the Housing section, we must adopt a Housing First approach in order to end homelessness in Albuquerque. To successfully implement a Housing First approach, we must have an adequate supply of affordable housing. But there is another piece to the puzzle. In order to implement a Housing First approach, agencies that serve people who experience homelessness and those who are vulnerable to homelessness must see connecting people to housing as a critical part of their mission. This means that service agencies themselves must adopt a housing first approach and place top priority on helping people access housing.

Many service agencies in Albuquerque provide excellent service for families and individuals who experience homelessness and are at risk of becoming homeless. However, they do not always see connecting people to housing and helping them stay in housing as a core part of their mission. Instead, their focus is on providing high quality services in their area, such as mental health counseling, emergency shelter or job training. Adopting a Housing First approach does not mean

that agencies stop focusing on doing what they do best. Instead, it means that agencies take steps to help clients find and stay in housing and that they define their success in part by clients' housing success, because agencies recognize that their clients will be better able to utilize their services and move forward with their lives when they have housing.

**Supportive Housing:**  
Supportive housing, in its broadest definition, is housing linked with social services tailored to the needs of the population being housed. Supportive services can be either on-site or off-site.

**Issue #2: Some individuals and families need more intensive long-term support and assistance in order to be able to successfully regain and maintain housing.**

In addition to affordable housing, a portion of people who experience homelessness need long-term case management support and intensive wrap-around services to both find and maintain their housing. For this portion of the population, long-term, intensive, wrap-around services are critical. Without these services, some individuals and families may not be able to maintain their housing. Intensive services include substance abuse treatment, physical and mental health services, help in obtaining public assistance or benefits, and or job training and placement. Yet funding for both case management and intensive wrap-around services is limited, meaning that it can be difficult for people experiencing homelessness to access these types of resources.

**Issue #3: Access to affordable, high quality medical care is very limited**

Most people who experience homelessness do not have health care. Most adults do not qualify for Medicaid, and even those that do qualify are not necessarily receiving it. Low-income working people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness may not have the option of purchasing health insurance through their employer or are unlikely to be able to afford it.

In 2014, this picture will change. In 2014, Medicaid will be expanded to all adults who earn less than 133% of the federal poverty level. This has the potential to increase homeless adults' ability to obtain the behavioral health care (including case management services) and medical care they need to be healthy. However, there are still many obstacles. First, being eligible for Medicaid does not mean that people will automatically have Medicaid – they still need to enroll and enrollment in public benefits has always been challenging for people without homes. Even once a person has Medicaid, there might still not be an adequate supply of medical or behavioral health services available. And behavioral health and medical care providers may not know how to meet the special needs of families and individuals who have experienced homelessness.

**Issue #4: Existing social services in Albuquerque are extremely fragmented. Collaboration among multiple organizations and sectors of the community are needed in order to address the issue of homelessness.**

Homelessness is a complex problem. People experience homelessness for different reasons and need different types of assistance to move out of homelessness. The majority of supportive services that low-income individuals need to gain and remain in housing are provided by entities not

specifically focused on assisting people who have lost their homes. This includes services such as housing counseling, credit counseling, financial literacy, substance abuse treatment, mental and behavioral health services, job training, and income support

However, people often have difficulty accessing the services they need because the service system in Albuquerque is highly fragmented. In particular, services between homeless service providers and other types of service providers are not well coordinated. As a result, the complex needs of very low-income people are often not met effectively by the social service network.

Albuquerque needs a well connected services network, consisting of a broad spectrum of services – not just homelessness services. This requires collaboration among many diverse organizations and community members including public institutions, public systems of support, the city, the county, police, neighborhood associations, businesses, citizens, and non-profit organizations. These services need to be coordinated such that an individual is able to access a spectrum of services to meet their needs. A critical component of this strong network is an adequate public transportation system, by which people can get to where they need to go.

Based on the issues identified above, this Plan establishes the following objectives and strategies to improve health and stability.

**Objective 1: Improve access to medical and behavioral health care**

- **Strategy 1:** As Medicaid is expanded to all adults living in poverty, ensure that people who experience homelessness obtain Medicaid
- **Strategy 2:** Strengthen the network of medical and behavioral health providers through coordination and collaboration
- **Strategy 3:** Train medical and behavioral health providers in the needs of people experiencing homelessness
- **Strategy 4:** Identify gaps and needs in existing medical and behavioral health services

**Objective 2: Strengthen and sustain access to comprehensive supportive services**

- **Strategy 1:** Improve existing supportive services resources through training in effective recovery-based practices and services
- **Strategy 2:** Prioritize resources for supportive services that can help people gain and remain in housing

## **Goal 3: Increase Economic Security**

**Poverty is a defining factor in the growing number of people who experience homelessness.**

Poverty is the most common denominator among people who do not have a place to live. Many people who work full-time, and who work more than 40 hours a week, do not earn enough money to afford safe housing. Some people have a disability that prohibits them from working and are unable to obtain disability benefits. Even for those who are able to obtain disability benefits, the income provided by these benefits is insufficient to pay for housing at the fair market rent. Many elderly people who receive social security income after a lifetime of working also have low incomes.

**Issue #1: For a large segment of the population, earnings from work are not enough to cover the cost of housing and other basic living expenses.**

Many people who experience homelessness or who are at risk of becoming homeless are employed. In a survey of people experiencing homelessness in Albuquerque, 26 percent of respondents reported that they were employed<sup>5</sup>.

Wages are often insufficient to cover the cost of housing and other basic living expenses, including utilities. As a result, many Albuquerque households pay more than 30 percent of their income towards housing. In part, this situation is created by the declining value of wages. Today, the federal minimum wage is worth 26 percent less than it was in 1970<sup>6</sup>.

Even a person working full-time and earning the new minimum wage in Albuquerque (\$8.50/hr) will only make \$17,680 a year. If this person was a single parent supporting two children, she would still be living in poverty.<sup>7</sup>

This full-time, minimum wage earner would not be able to afford

**Fair Market Rent:** Fair Market Rent (FMR) is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) best estimate of what a household seeking modest rental unit can expect to pay in the private market for rent and utilities in the current local economy. Fair Market Rents are adjusted for bedroom size. The two-bedroom FMR in 2013 for Albuquerque is \$780 per month.

**Affordable Housing:** Housing that costs more than 30 percent of household's income is considered unaffordable because many households that pay more than this amount do not have enough remaining income to pay for other basic living expenses such as food, medicine and medical care, transportation, utilities, child care and other basic necessities.

**Housing Wage:** The hourly wage necessary to pay for the fair market rent for an apartment while spending no more than 30 percent of income on housing cost.

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<sup>5</sup> Results of a Survey Conducted of People Experiencing Homelessness in Albuquerque, NM Coalition to End Homelessness, September 2007

<sup>6</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, "Why are People Homeless," June 2006. <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/Why.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> According to the 2006 Federal Poverty Guidelines, a household of 3 with an income below \$16,600 is considered to be living in poverty

a two bedroom apartment at the 2013 **fair market rent** of \$780. She would be paying 53% of her income towards the cost of rent. To afford a two bedroom apartment in Albuquerque at the 2013 fair market rent of \$780, a household needs to earn a **housing wage** of \$31,200 a year or \$15 per hour.

As we discussed in the Housing section, the housing cost burden is highest for very low-income households, including those making minimum wage. The majority of very low income households pay more than 30 percent of their income towards housing costs. To end homelessness we must ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing but we must also ensure that workers earn a **housing wage** – that is, their wages can cover the cost of housing and other basic necessities

Poverty is not a minor issue in our community. Tackling poverty to end homelessness in our community will not be easy. Yet we cannot truly attempt to address homelessness without directly acknowledging that poverty and homelessness are inextricably linked. To end homelessness in Albuquerque we must create more economic opportunities for our very low-income residents.

## **Issue #2: People who experience homelessness may have difficulty finding and maintaining employment.**

We must help connect those who are homeless or vulnerable to homelessness to good quality jobs that pay a housing wage. While many people who experience homelessness are employed, many face significant obstacles to obtaining employment or to obtaining better-paying jobs. Twenty-five percent of homeless people in Albuquerque reported that an inability to find employment was a major obstacle to exiting homelessness and 37 percent said job search assistance or job training could help them exit homelessness<sup>8</sup>.

Some of those obstacles are purely logistical. Without a permanent address or phone number, potential employers cannot contact an applicant who is homeless. An applicant may not have a place to take a shower or may not have nice clothes to wear to the interview. He or she may not have any form of transportation to get to an interview.

In many cases, the obstacles run deeper. Many people who experience homelessness may have a limited work history or may have limited skills. This makes it difficult to find good quality employment that could, ultimately, lead to housing. Some people may have ongoing challenges, such as mental illness, substance abuse or domestic violence that make it difficult to look for a job or, once having obtained one, keep their job over the long-term. If people are able to find employment, limited transportation options and unaffordable childcare can also pose major obstacles to keeping their job.

To help people find and maintain their employment we need to help provide solutions to logistical obstacles that stand in their way to even getting an interview. A bus pass, a place to take a shower and a nice interview outfit could make a big difference.

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<sup>8</sup>Results of a Survey Conducted of People Experiencing Homelessness in Albuquerque, NM Coalition to End Homelessness, September 2007

We also need to help people develop the work experience and skills needed to obtain better paying jobs. We need to provide ongoing support for people who have found employment but need supportive services to work through challenges that may undermine their employment success. We also need to develop transportation and childcare solutions.

This strategy creates unique opportunities to build collaborative relationships with employers. Employers need a skilled, reliable workforce. By working together, job trainers can help individuals build skills for jobs that need workers. By providing ongoing support, service providers can help employees stay on the job, reducing turnover costs for employers.

**Issue #3: The mainstream resources which make up our social safety net often do not reach those people who become homeless or those most at risk of becoming homeless.**

Many low-income households often cannot access the social safety net which could both prevent homelessness and help people exit homelessness. The programs which create the social safety net for very low-income people by providing a source of income include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Welfare-to-Work, Food Stamps, Veteran's Benefits, General Assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), and Medicaid. These programs are referred to as "**mainstream**

**resources.**" Although they do not specifically target people who are homeless these programs can be an important resource for people who have lost their homes or are at risk of losing their homes. In particular, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) can be a vital resource for some people who experience homelessness. SSI is a federal benefit program that provides benefits to people with disabilities who are not able to work.

The process of applying for benefits is extremely confusing and complex. It often prevents those that qualify from receiving benefits because they lack the ability to navigate the process. Once a person becomes homeless the barriers to these resources increase due to lack of an address or phone. Long waiting times for benefits may cause a person to become homeless and extends the length of time that they remain homeless. Lack of affordable transportation options can also be a barrier to applying.

We need to build a better system of care where people can quickly get to and smoothly access and enter the system of services that make up the social safety net. To build a system of care, we will need to better coordinate existing services and improve access to benefits for eligible households.

It is important to note, however, that even those that are able to obtain mainstream benefits continue to have low incomes. SSI recipients whose sole source of income is SSI live far below the federal poverty level. The maximum SSI payment for an individual in 2013 is \$710 per month, which

**Mainstream resources:**

The term "mainstream resources" is used to refer generically to any social service program that is not population-specific in terms of who it serves. These social service programs provide services to a broad segment of the population; while that includes people who experience homelessness these programs are not specifically designed to serve people who have lost their housing.

is \$8,520 a year. It is critical that we develop an adequate supply of affordable housing for certain members of our community, such as those who cannot work because of a disability. It is also critical that we continue to help people obtain employment that pays a housing wage even after they have obtained benefits.

Based on the issues identified above, this Plan establishes the following objectives and strategies to increase economic security.

**Objective 1: Increase Albuquerque’s minimum wage so that it is equal to or exceeds the housing wage**

- **Strategy 1:** Partner with groups working to increase the minimum wage in Albuquerque
- **Strategy 2:** Develop business champions

**Objective 2: An increase in access to high wage/high skill jobs**

- **Strategy 1:** Increase the capacity of homeless services agencies to provide job skills and training
- **Strategy 2:** Advocate to change the state’s child care subsidy policy so that the child care subsidy slowly phases out as parents’ increase their income
- **Strategy 3:** Improve the public transportation system in Albuquerque (i.e. more comprehensive holiday/weekend schedule, extended hours, bus stops near services locations)
- **Strategy 4:** Advocate to allow GED classes to count towards TANF work/education requirements
- Collaborate with existing economic development initiatives to assist with employment

**Objective 3: Increase access to mainstream resources**

- **Strategy 1:** Improve relationships with the Social Security Administration and Human Services Department Income Supportive Division
- **Strategy 2:** Increase resources for SOAR, particularly funding for SOAR representatives
- **Strategy 3:** Eliminate barriers in entitlement programs that make it difficult for people to access or keep these benefits

**SOAR:** SOAR stands for SSI/SSDI Outreach Access and Recovery. SSI and SSDI are federal disability benefits. SOAR is a specific model for helping homeless people with disabilities successfully obtain SSI or SSDI the first time they apply.

## **Goal 4: Rebuild the Homeless Crisis Response System**

**People experiencing homelessness or who are vulnerable to homelessness in Albuquerque must be able to quickly and smoothly access the assistance they need to move out of homelessness and/or to maintain their housing.**

In order to end homelessness in Albuquerque, those experiencing homelessness and those who are at high risk of becoming homeless must be able to quickly access the help they need. In order to stretch our resources as far as possible, this also means targeting the right resources to the right people for the right amount of time.

### **Issue #1: There is not a coordinated process for accessing help.**

There are many programs in Albuquerque that serve people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. However, there is no centralized or coordinated way in which an individual or family in need of help can find out which program is the best fit for their needs. Instead, most individuals and families must call or visit multiple agencies. This can be a frustrating and often futile experience, as households will learn that they do not meet eligibility criteria, are unable to reach the right staff who could tell them more about the program or learn that the program they have contacted is full.

### **Issue #2: No community-wide system for prioritizing housing and services or for targeting the right resource to the right household**

Currently most agencies in Albuquerque that serve people experiencing homelessness conduct their own individualized assessments and intakes to determine who is eligible for those programs. Most also maintain their own individual waiting lists. While there are advantages to this approach, it can also create a more fragmented, difficult-to-assess system for those trying to obtain help. It may also make it more likely that a household obtains housing and services from the first agency that has an opening for them, rather than the agency that is the best fit. While most agencies are operating at capacity nearly all the time, the current system may also mean that sometimes resources are underutilized.

### **Issue #3: There are limited services available for those who just need short-term rental assistance and services to obtain and remain in housing**

Many people who are homeless or at high risk of becoming homeless only need a short-term amount of rental assistance and services in order to obtain or remain in housing. Yet, most of the assistance that is available provides more medium to long term support.

### **Objective 1: Increase Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Resources**

- **Strategy 1:** Increase local, state and federal funding for prevention and rapid rehousing

**Objective 2: Develop a centralized or coordinated assessment system**

- **Strategy 1:** Identify funding resources
- **Strategy 2:** Increase and maximize utilization of the **Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)**, particularly as a tool for identifying when and where there are open beds
- **Strategy 3:** Engage in system mapping so we know what housing resources are available and how people access them
- **Strategy 4:** Strengthen collaboration between agencies
- **Strategy 5:** Develop a standardized vulnerability index and assessment tool in order to help target and prioritize the right resources to the right person. These tools should account for the needs of different subpopulations.

**Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)** – The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a web-based software application that records and stores information on the characteristics and service needs of people who are homeless. Homeless service providers generally gather the data from their clients and enter it into the system. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development requires all programs that receive federal homelessness funding to use HMIS.

## **Goal 5 – Build the Community and Political Will Needed to End Homelessness**

**In order to generate the political will and resource investments needed to end homeless in Albuquerque, there must be strong community support for ending homelessness.**

We need to build strong community support for policies and programs that can end homelessness. A strong, mobilized community that cares about homelessness will provide community leaders with the support they need to take bold steps forward. Without this strong community support, homelessness will not be considered a serious enough problem to necessitate an urgent, coordinated response.

**Issue #1: The average citizen has a negative perception of the homeless population. This negative perception is an obstacle to building public support for solutions that can end homelessness.**

The average citizen's experience with people experiencing homelessness occurs with those that are seen on street corners downtown or at the end of highway exit ramps. Most people perceive these individuals as being "scary and crazy." As a result, people's perceptions of what causes homelessness and who experiences homelessness are often skewed and inaccurate. While homeless people are often perceived as dangerous, people experiencing homelessness are much more likely to be the victims of crime than the perpetrators of crime. Many people assume that substance abuse or mental illness is the sole cause of a person's homelessness. They do not see how a complex web of factors, including poverty, can contribute to a person's loss of housing. Moreover, many people who experience homelessness are invisible to the public eye; they include people who hold full-time jobs and whose co-workers never suspect that they have no home to go to after work, teenagers who go to school and then sleep under a bridge at night, and parents who may pick up their children from school and then spend the night in their car or in a motel.

We must address the negative perceptions of people experiencing homelessness because these negative perceptions are an obstacle to public support for homeless initiatives, including funding by governments, finding locations to develop housing units and raising private funds to support programs and capital needs.

**Issue #2: Homelessness is not a visible problem to most members of our community.**

Most people experiencing homelessness are not visible to the public. Many stay in substandard motels, doubled up with family or friends, in camps in the foothills or Bosque or in their car. As a result, we do not know they are homeless. Even those who are visible to the public tend to stay in a few neighborhoods. This reality means that many members of our community do not recognize homelessness as a serious problem. This invisibility leads to inaction, since people are not inclined to take action against a problem they do not witness. To build public support for ending homelessness

we need to help our community understand that thousands of people in Albuquerque become homeless every year and that homelessness has a negative impact on all of us.

**Issue #3: People do not believe it is possible to end homelessness.**

Many do not believe that it is possible to actually end homelessness. The truth is, however, that we know what it takes to end homelessness. The challenge is building the community and political will needed to fully invest and implement those solutions. We need a concise, unified and compelling message that inspires the general public and key decision-makers to believe that ending homelessness is possible.

Based on the issues identified above, this Plan establishes the following objectives and strategies to build the political and community will needed to end homelessness.

**Objective 1: Educate key stakeholders and elected officials about homelessness**

- **Strategy 1:** Develop ongoing relationships with elected officials and other key stakeholders
- **Strategy 2:** Engage the City’s Mayor as a champion in ending homelessness

**Objective 2: Develop a public information campaign to educate the general public about homelessness**

- **Strategy 1:** Create a growing network from the public and private sector that supports the mission
- **Strategy 2:** Engage professional support in public education and media efforts
- **Strategy 3:** Develop a “motto” or catchy phrase for public information about homelessness
- **Strategy 4:** Engage Point-in-Time count volunteers
- **Strategy 5:** Provide pragmatic, concrete info on the public impact of homelessness

## **Implementation**

### **Leadership**

The Albuquerque Strategic Collaborative to End Homelessness will provide leadership in implementing *A Community Response to Homelessness*. The mission of the Albuquerque Strategic Collaborative to End Homelessness is to improve the system of care that exists in Albuquerque for people experiencing homelessness through collaborative, proactive planning. The New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness coordinates the Collaborative. Currently, the Collaborative includes representatives from nonprofit homeless services agencies, the City of Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, Albuquerque Housing Authority, Bernalillo County Housing Authority and the New Mexico VA. The Collaborative will engage other stakeholders in implementing specific components of the Plan.

### **Measuring Our Progress**

*A Community Response to Homelessness* establishes several system-wide metrics to measure our progress in implementing the Plan. We decided to use system-wide metrics, rather than goal-specific metrics, for several different reasons. First, we wanted to use metrics that helped us evaluate our progress in meeting the Plan's vision **to make homelessness in Albuquerque rare, short-lived and non-recurring**. Second, we know that in order to reduce and prevent homelessness, we must make progress simultaneously across all five goals in this plan. Third, we know that reducing and preventing homelessness will require support and engagement from stakeholders across Albuquerque.

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) will be a powerful tool as we measure our progress in making homelessness rare, short-lived and non-recurring. HMIS is an online database that all HUD-funded homeless service agencies are required to use (some non-HUD funded agencies also participate in HMIS).

We will use the following metrics. The table below shows the outcome we hope to achieve by 2017, our current baseline for that outcome, and what data sources we will use.

	<b>Measurable Outcome</b>	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>
<b>Rare</b>	Reduce the number of people who experience homelessness by 50% in 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•1,170 people are homeless on any given night (2013 PIT Count; "homeless" means living in emergency shelter, transitional housing or on the streets).</li> <li>•During the 2011-2012 academic school year, Albuquerque Public Schools Title I Homelessness Program served 6,123 homeless children</li> </ul>	Point-in-Time Count, Albuquerque Public Schools data, Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)
<b>Short-Lived</b>	Reduce the length of time that people are homeless	To be determined	To be determined, possibly HMIS
<b>Non-Recurring</b>	<p>Increase the number of people who obtain/remain in permanent housing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•70% of permanent supportive housing tenants stay housed at least 12 months</li> <li>•80% of permanent supportive housing tenants stay housed at least 7 months</li> <li>•90% of all permanent supportive housing tenants are still in program or have exited to permanent housing annually</li> <li>•75% of transitional housing clients exit to permanent housing</li> <li>•Increase the percentage of people exiting from emergency shelter to transitional or permanent housing (specific percentage to be determined)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•78% of all Continuum of Care (Coc) funded permanent supportive housing tenants remained housed for at least 7 months</li> <li>•64% of all permanent supportive housing clients who entered a CoC funded permanent supportive housing program on or prior to 8/16/10 were still in the program 12 months later</li> <li>•79% of all CoC permanent supportive housing program client were still in the program or had exited to permanent housing by the end of the operating year</li> <li>•77% of all CoC funded transitional housing program clients who exited the program went into permanent housing</li> </ul>	HMIS

### **A Role for Everyone**

We hope that as you read this plan you were able to identify a role that you can play to end homelessness in Albuquerque. We further hope that you were able to identify a role that we might not have thought of. Here is a review of some of the roles that we have identified:

- Private sector developers, contractors, landlords and foundations can take leadership to increase affordable housing by developing new housing, rehabilitating existing housing, setting aside units within housing developments, donating resources, and developing creative solutions to reducing the costs of housing.
- Landlords can improve access to affordable housing by building relationships with supportive housing providers.
- Policy-makers can clarify existing rules and regulations that pose potential barriers for people attempting to access affordable housing and create incentives for the development of new affordable housing.
- Churches, faith-based organizations, social and fraternal societies, local businesses and neighborhood associations can become knowledgeable about services and reach out to low-income residents in order to link them to the assistance they may need to remain in housing.
- Social service providers can work together to create a community-based system of coordinated services. They can build relationships across all types of organizations in order to help individuals access and remain in housing. They can work with institutions to create appropriate discharge planning policies to prevent discharging individuals without shelter.
- Social service providers, mainstream resource system agencies, policy-makers, educators and businesses can work to improve real wages in Albuquerque for those who are able and willing to work and increase income from other sources for those unable to work.
- Business and community leaders, policy-makers and citizens including those who have experienced a loss of housing can participate in planning and decision-making through the Community Leadership Team.
- Elected officials can place the issue on the agenda and begin a discussion about solutions.
- You – can help.

## **Appendix A**

The following organizations and people were involved in updating *A Community Response to Homelessness in Albuquerque*:

Albuquerque Community Foundation  
Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless  
Albuquerque Housing Authority  
Albuquerque Rescue Mission  
Barrett Foundation  
Bernalillo County – Renee’s Project  
Bernalillo County Housing Authority  
Catholic Charities  
Central United Methodist Church  
City of Albuquerque, Department of Family and Community Services  
Crossroads for Women  
CLNkids  
Family Promise of Albuquerque  
First Nations Community HealthSource  
Goodwill Industries  
Henrietta C., consumer  
Hogares  
Metropolitan Homelessness Project  
Mortgage Finance Authority  
NewLife Homes  
New Mexico AIDS Services  
New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness  
New Mexico Veterans Administration  
Paul L., consumer  
SAFE House  
St. Martin’s Hospitality Center  
Supportive Housing Coalition of New Mexico  
Transitional Living Services  
Transgender Resource Center  
Youth Development Incorporated (YDI)  
UNMH ACT Team  
UNM Health Sciences Center – Pathways Program