

# REGIONAL COMMISSION ON HOMELESSNESS

*Three-year report*



United Way of  
Metropolitan Atlanta

# Three years of collective community progress in ending homelessness

## Introduction

Metro Atlanta has set a bold yet achievable goal—to end chronic homelessness by 2013. Over the past three years, we have seen clear indications that our community has the resources, intellect, compassion, leadership and desire to address the issues surrounding chronic homelessness.

With coordination and leadership from the Regional Commission on Homelessness, many individuals and groups throughout our region have been actively engaged since April 2003 in developing and implementing an unprecedented, collaborative solution. The work of the Regional Commission is moving the region along a defined, collective course of action guided by our strategic plan, the *Blueprint to End Homelessness in Ten Years*.

This report covers the first three years of our community's progress toward ending chronic homelessness. Much has been achieved, much remains to be done. Our vision has never been clearer or more promising. By sustaining and encouraging the momentum of our many partnerships throughout the region, we will continue to find and implement innovative, productive and practical solutions that help the homeless achieve the stability and quality of life that every American desires.

### **Heartfelt support, heartfelt thanks**

Since this effort began, many supporters have stepped forward to provide the resources needed to fulfill so ambitious a mandate. It is clear from the generous financial support of the private and public sectors—more than \$42 million raised—that there is a genuine commitment to help the homeless men, women and children in our region.

The Regional Commission greatly appreciates this support of the entire metro region.

## Leaders step forward to tackle homelessness, using insight and expertise

Key to the Regional Commission's progress is the wide range of talents brought by members. The diverse mix of perspectives represented makes this an unprecedented and extraordinary group. We thank each of them for their dedication.

We also extend our deep appreciation to the many partnering organizations throughout the region. With their dedicated staff and volunteers, the community's vision of ending chronic homelessness is becoming a reality.

### Members of the Regional Commission on Homelessness as of October 2006

**Horace Sibley**, Chair  
Retired partner  
King & Spalding LLP

**Dr. Louis Sullivan**, Co-Chair  
President emeritus  
Morehouse School of Medicine

**Charles Bannister**  
Commissioner  
Gwinnett County Government

**Kip Berry**  
Benchmark Homes

**Isaac Blythers**  
Former president  
Atlanta Gas Light and Chattanooga Gas

**Bill Bolling**  
Executive director  
Atlanta Community Food Bank

**Nancy Boxill**  
Commissioner  
Fulton County Government

**Ray Buday**  
Executive director  
Marietta Housing Authority

**Carmen Chubb**  
Assistant commissioner for housing  
Georgia Department of  
Community Affairs

**Mayor Shirley Franklin**  
City of Atlanta

**Ellen Gerstein**  
Executive director  
Gwinnett County Coalition for Health  
and Human Services

**Charles Hall**  
Former mayor  
City of Forest Park

**Karen Handel**  
Commissioner  
Fulton County

**Jack Hardin**  
Partner  
Rogers & Hardin

**Archie Hill**  
Director  
Fannie Mae Atlanta Partnership Office

**Vaughn D. Irons**  
National director of expanding markets  
Freddie Mac

**Allan Jones**  
Staples, Inc.

**Martin Jones**  
Council member  
City of Conyers

**Vernon Jones**  
Chief executive officer  
DeKalb County Government

**Laura Keenan**  
Director, community development  
Bank of America

**Ann Wead Kimbrough**  
Chief of staff  
DeKalb County Government

**Jim Laney**  
President emeritus  
Emory University

**Emily Lembeck**  
Superintendent  
Marietta City Schools

**Bill McCargo**  
Vice president, community relations  
Scientific Atlanta, Inc., A Cisco Company

**Randy Merrill**  
Senior vice president  
CB Richard Ellis

**Tim Mescon**  
Dean, Coles College of Business  
Kennesaw State University

**Reverend James Milner**  
Executive director  
Community Concerns

**Mark O'Connell**  
President  
United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta

**Sam Olens**  
Commissioner  
Cobb County Government

**Carl Patton**  
President  
Georgia State University

**Carl Rhodenizer**  
Commissioner  
Clayton County Government

**William Riley**  
Former chief judge  
Atlanta Community Court

**Dr. Joseph Roberts**  
Retired senior pastor  
Ebenezer Baptist Church

**Glenn Sears**  
Commissioner  
Rockdale County Government

**Debi Starnes**  
Former council member  
Atlanta City Council

**Tawano Tarno**  
Executive director  
Calvary Refuge Center

**Gary Thompson**  
Retired CEO—Georgia Banking  
Wachovia Bank, N.A.

**Mayor Mickey Thompson**  
City of Douglasville

**Michael Thurmond**  
Commissioner  
Georgia Department of Labor

**Beverly Walker**  
Commissioner  
Georgia Department of  
Human Resources

**Tom Worthan**  
Commissioner  
Douglas County Government



*Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, Jack Hardin (left), 2006 chair of the United Way Board of Directors, and Horace Sibley, chair of the Regional Commission on Homelessness.*

## A path and a plan—the ten-year *Blueprint*

**The time:** November 2002

**The community challenge:** Faced with a burgeoning homeless population, fragmentation of services, divided leadership and competing priorities, Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin asked a monumental task of United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta: coordinate a community planning effort to tackle homelessness in the City of Atlanta. United Way accepted the challenge.

United Way tapped its fundamental strength of bringing together communities and assembled a Commission on Homelessness. The commission would use its collective skills, influence and expertise to evaluate data about the region’s homeless population, analyze the existing services of provider agencies, determine funding sources and incorporate best practices from across the nation for addressing chronic homelessness.

**The community approach:** In 2002, the commission composed of 16 civic, community, faith and business leaders convened to organize the community’s ideas and issues. It became apparent that a comprehensive, multi-year plan to end chronic homelessness was necessary.

The commission enlisted the input of a broad cross-section of community stakeholders, including more than 90 individuals representing 64 organizations, and subject experts who provided data and insight. Public forums were held throughout the process, and interviews were conducted with nearly 100 homeless men and women.

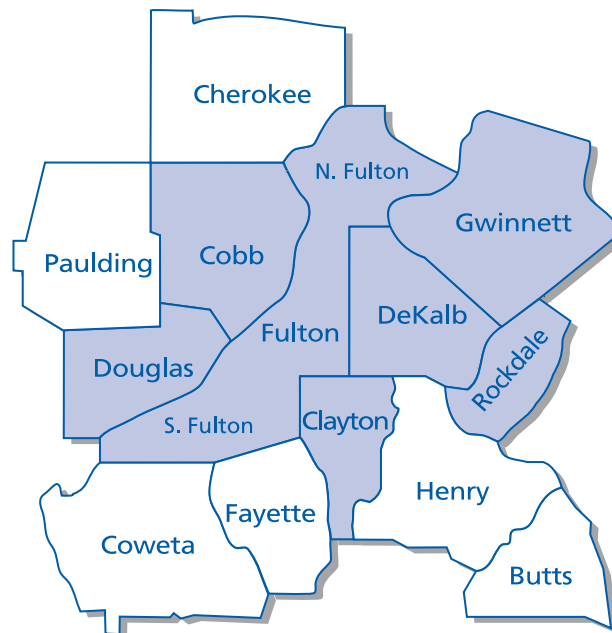
“The community gave us a tremendous wealth of data, ideas and possibilities,” said Horace Sibley, chair of the Regional Commission. “What began to emerge became the underlying principle of the final plan, something we began to refer to as the ‘closing the front door, opening the back door’ approach.”

We defined “chronic homelessness” as people who either have been homeless for a year or more or engaged in repetitive cycles of homelessness due to mental health or addiction problems.

“Closing the front door” refers to a range of prevention strategies and services that attempt to prevent chronic homelessness before it begins. Examples of these preventive strategies are emergency financial assistance and reunification with a family support system.

### Regional Commission membership and year joined

- City of Atlanta: November 2002
- DeKalb County and Fulton County: May 2003
- Clayton County: March 2004
- Cobb County: April 2004
- Douglas County: July 2004
- Rockdale County: September 2004
- Gwinnett County: March 2006





*After escaping a domestic violence situation, Charlotte found her way to Shepherd's Rest Ministries, a United Way community partner serving Douglas and Paulding counties. Shepherd's Rest Ministries provides shelter and services to women and children who have been, or are at risk of being, displaced from their homes because of family violence. Charlotte now works as a cook for a local child care center and volunteers at Shepherd's Rest.*

The second half of the equation—"opening the back door"—addresses services that bring people into a more sustainable lifestyle that reduces the chances of experiencing another bout of homelessness in the future. These services include supportive housing, employment opportunities and mental health and addiction screening and treatment.

The result: The result of the commission's work was the *Blueprint to End Homelessness in Ten Years*, a comprehensive approach to preventing homelessness and ending chronic homelessness. The *Blueprint* included the following strategies:

- Prevention
- Outreach, intake and assessment
- Ongoing support services, including emergency shelter
- Transitional and permanent supportive housing

The *Blueprint* was presented to Mayor Franklin. Mayor Franklin accepted the *Blueprint*, as well as the commission's recommendation to expand the original group to become a Regional Commission, one that would reflect the wider scope of issues, perspectives and best practices.

Visit [unitedwayatlanta.org](http://unitedwayatlanta.org) to download the *Blueprint to End Homelessness in Ten Years*.

*Outreach, intake and assessment strategies are a critical component of efforts to end homelessness. These strategies bring together an array of tools designed to determine the most appropriate form of treatment and services and to connect homeless individuals with the services they need to move toward their maximum level of self-sufficiency.*



## A better way: forming a network of services

The Regional Commission's approach to ending chronic homelessness includes an integrated system of programs and services that helps prevent a crisis situation or helps move people into a more stable living environment.

Celebrate some of the successes of the *Blueprint*:

### Travelers Aid and reunification

Thanks to the Travelers Aid of Metropolitan Atlanta Reunification Program and the 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center, nearly 3,400 people have been reunited with their families or connected with other verified support systems. Travelers Aid helps ease the transition back into family life by helping family members understand the issues facing their homeless relatives. Beyond family connections, Travelers Aid can bring a chronically homeless person into the varied supportive programs provided by the 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center. Travelers Aid also acts as a hub where other regional partners involved in reunification can coordinate their efforts.

### 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center

As a central point of assistance, the 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center plays a key role by helping chronically homeless people move toward permanent housing and other vital services. Since its opening in July 2005, the Gateway Center has had a significant impact on immediate crisis services and longer-term assistance.

- More than 6,300 people helped via on-site programs and community-based partners
- More than 470 people placed in addiction treatment programs
- 330 people found jobs or entered training programs resulting in employment, including graduates of The Atlanta Collaborative Kitchen (TACK) culinary arts training program
- 550 individuals and families placed in permanent or supportive housing
- More than 115,000 meals served
- 830 homeless individuals received clinical mental health assessments

The center is truly a gateway—a portal to connect many people to the services and resources they need to be self-sufficient.



*The 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center's on-site primary care clinic operated by Saint Joseph's Mercy Care Services had 1,813 visits by homeless individuals seeking primary healthcare as of June 30, 2006.*

### Number of people reunited for the past three years

#### Program launched in November 2003

November 2004	more than 1,800
November 2005	more than 2,500
June 2006	more than 3,400

**By ending the cycle of high-cost crisis care and emergency housing, supportive housing offers direct and indirect economic benefits to the community.**

### **From shelters to housing**

The Regional Commission has adopted best practice models that shift from the traditional emergency shelter model. These approaches include the assessment center model and a “housing first” approach. Both of these approaches intend to move an individual quickly toward appropriate long-term housing situations. The assessment center model emphasizes the need for an immediate assessment of the individual’s needs and gets them started on a plan toward self sufficiency. The Housing First model provides chronically homeless people with their own apartments first, and then connects them with the necessary range of services.

Our early work with these models is showing significant promise.

*Brenda Smith has found a new home and a new life at The Drake House, which offers emergency residential housing for women and children in north Fulton County.*



*Supportive services are a key component of an effort to end homelessness. These programs assist homeless people by treating the underlying factors that cause and prolong homelessness.*



## **Solution: supportive housing**

Supportive housing is key to ending chronic homelessness. Homeless individuals often become heavy consumers of costly public services. The Regional Commission encourages the development of supportive housing that incorporates a range of services.

Through transitional housing programs and permanent supportive housing, homeless individuals can have a place to live and supportive services with the ultimate goal of achieving self-sufficiency.

Hope House, a 70-bed transitional housing facility located in downtown Atlanta, helps chronically homeless men enrolled in substance-abuse recovery programs transition into self-sufficiency by encouraging steady employment, improving family relationships and providing housing.

The results to date show that supportive housing options hold great promise for the region. With more than 600 supportive housing units created and \$29.5 million in funding available to create more, there is movement toward a more sustainable set of solutions.

**Supportive housing:** decent, safe, sanitary housing that combines affordable rents with services (on-site or off-site) that enable people who either have been homeless for more than a year or have had four episodes of homelessness within three years to have their own apartment.

## **A place for veterans**

Homeless veterans face unique challenges. That is why the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs funds or supports the operation of 152 beds for supportive and transitional housing for veterans throughout the region. Forty-six of these beds are in the 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center.

### **Supportive housing beds developed and in development**

<b>Supportive housing beds developed as of June 30, 2006</b>	550
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<b>Supportive housing beds developed in 2007</b>	350
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*Samaritan House of Atlanta helps homeless men and women achieve self-sufficiency through personalized employment readiness and life stabilization programs.*

## **Combining prevention strategies and support services creates stability**

A chronically homeless person may struggle against many overwhelming forces, such as addiction, unemployment and poverty. Prevention strategies implement practical ways to prevent people nearing crisis from becoming homeless.

### **Emergency financial assistance**

Access to emergency financial assistance (rent, utilities) helps families and individuals experiencing a financial crisis maintain housing stability, often preventing homelessness.

- More than \$900,000 in rent and mortgage assistance grants have been distributed to community partners to help more than 1,000 households.
- Sixty percent of households remained in stable housing after 90 days of assistance.

### **Addiction and mental health**

People will continue to cycle in and out of jails and hospitals until the community adequately addresses the addiction and mental health needs of chronically homeless individuals. An effective program is needed to avoid expensive crisis solutions and humanely meet the needs of this population.

- Treatment courts—multiple jurisdictions provide alternatives to incarceration.
- Mental health assessments—\$46,000 grant from The Community Foundation Homelessness and Health Initiative for testing at Fulton and DeKalb Drug Courts.

## Resources for women and children

Factors contributing to homelessness among women are often different from those for men. Effective solutions must therefore address those different conditions.

- More than 350 transitional and supportive housing beds have been created for women and children in the region.
- Partnership between the City of Atlanta, the Atlanta Women's Foundation and United Way Women's Legacy produced grants totaling \$700,000 to increase transitional and supportive services.

## Community court expansion

Homelessness is not a crime, but two of the driving factors for chronic homelessness—substance abuse and untreated mental illness—often place homeless people into the criminal justice system. Expanding the Atlanta Community Court increases the use of alternative sentencing options for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

- All 11 Atlanta Municipal Court judges have alternative sentencing power, as well as the option to refer cases to one of three Community Court judges.
- Each court has an assessment staff and case managers who screen individuals for substance abuse and mental illness.

## Employment

Chronic underemployment and unemployment are major contributing factors to homelessness. The goal of ending chronic homelessness must address barriers to employment, improved employability and employment opportunities.

- The Clean Street Program workforce development initiative, operated by Samaritan House, provides transitional employment to chronically homeless individuals.
- The Clean Start Program, operated by Goodwill Industries, provides chronically homeless individuals with intensive custodial training.
- The Georgia Department of Labor Career Center at the 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center has served more than 2,100 individuals as of June 30, 2006.



*The Drake House offers a variety of supportive services to empower and educate families and move them toward self-sufficiency.*

## Community support produces progress

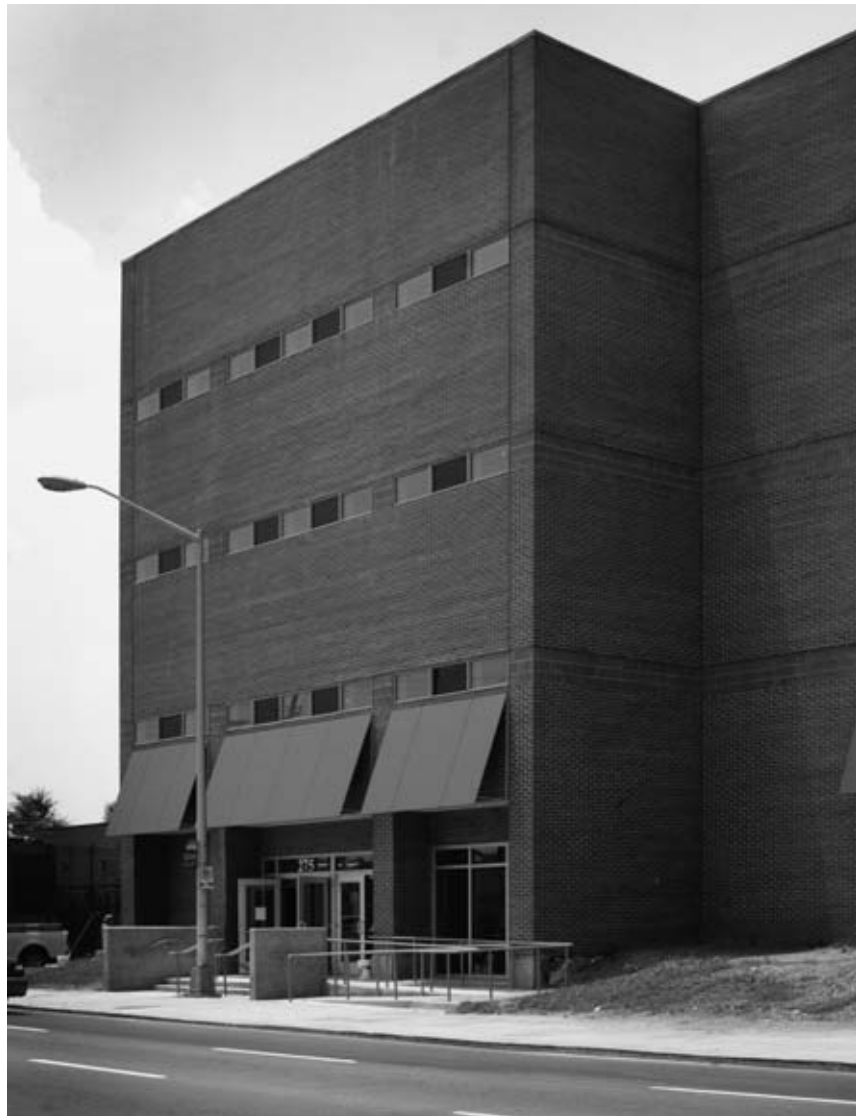
The abundance of financial and in-kind support from the community has been overwhelming.

The City of Atlanta is providing a \$22 million bond issuance through the Atlanta Development Authority for capital projects, such as creating more supportive housing. The Atlanta Housing Authority is strengthening the supportive housing system by committing to provide 100 project-based housing choice vouchers each year for five years, as part of a demonstration project.

The support of the private sector has been remarkable. In addition to providing \$20 million to support the work of the Regional Commission, the private sector has donated a variety of in-kind and *pro bono* services. Due to the support of Glencastle, a local consortium of commercial contractors, construction of the 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center was completed without overhead costs, resulting in a 25 percent savings to the community. *Pro bono* work from community partners such as the law firm King & Spalding LLP and the design firm of Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback & Associates shows how the entire community is joining the effort to end chronic homelessness.

Total funds raised and allocated by strategy	
Prevention strategies	\$1.5 million
Outreach/intake/assessment strategies	\$6.5 million
Supportive housing strategies	\$9 million
Supportive services	\$1.3 million
Women and children	\$3 million

*The 24/7 Gateway Homeless Services Center opened in July 2005. Collaboration is at the heart of the operational philosophy of the 24/7 Gateway Center. Provider partners include representatives from the business community, public sector, academia, the faith community and the nonprofit sector.*



*The Blueprint to End Homelessness includes specific strategies to help homeless women and children.*



## Progress by the numbers

The ongoing work to end chronic homelessness produces measurable results. The time, energy and resources focused on homelessness are making and will continue to make a tremendous impact in our community.

Pathways Community Network undertook the challenge of conducting and analyzing a full census of the homeless population in the City of Atlanta, as well as DeKalb and Fulton counties. The homeless census and survey painted a broader picture of the homeless and their needs.

Other efforts to count and document the homeless population and its needs have been implemented by the other jurisdictions as well.

The census and survey data has become a touchstone that all agencies and groups throughout the region can use to effectively develop specific services and strategies, as well as a means by which we can measure results.

### By the numbers

The third year of the Regional Commission's work marked an important milestone in the effort to end homelessness, as the January 2006 homeless census revealed for the first time a trend showing a decline in homelessness. According to the 2006 homeless census of the City of Atlanta, from 2005 to 2006:

- The city's homeless population declined by 6.2 percent.
- The number of homeless families decreased by 9.3 percent.
- The total number of homeless people who were not sheltered declined by 8.3 percent.

## Letter from Horace Sibley, chair of the Regional Commission on Homelessness

When Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and Mark O’Connell, president of United Way, approached me three years ago about chairing the Regional Commission on Homelessness, I was greatly inspired by their courageous leadership. Finding solutions to long-term homelessness would require that kind of leadership, the business community’s support, the faith community’s guidance, the help of local, state and federal government, and commitment from United Way. We believe that our community, building on past successes, can end chronic homelessness. A caring, organized community can ensure there is no long-term, permanent, chronic homelessness!

From the beginning, our commission recognized that long-term homelessness is not a “city issue”—it reaches into every county, town and village. That’s why this commission has expanded to include top leadership from seven major counties in our region: Cobb, Clayton, DeKalb, Douglas, Fulton, Gwinnett and Rockdale. We now bring regional perspective to understanding, assessing and supporting the hard work that must be done to eliminate chronic homelessness. We also work hand-in-hand with both the state and federal governments.

For the past three years, I have been amazed on a daily basis by the insights, expertise and quality of the work being done by the many agencies throughout the region and by the invaluable work of United Way in leading the commission’s efforts. Staff and volunteers alike do everything they can to make each homeless person’s life better. As a result, the community has made great strides toward preventing and ending homelessness.

This report shows you the progress made in just the first phase of our ten-year plan. Clearly, there is still much more to be done, but we have successfully embarked on an important journey.

Our generous supporters are making this important work possible. The commission has received more than \$20 million for programs and services. Another \$22 million has been made available by the City of Atlanta for housing, and much more is being contributed by constituent counties. When combined with the collaborative approaches being strengthened throughout the region, our *Blueprint to End Homelessness in Ten Years* has become a powerful force for change.

On a personal note, I want to acknowledge publicly the work done by the Regional Commission members and staff. Their friendship, expertise and guidance are making this massive undertaking a reality and a truly life-changing endeavor for thousands of citizens.

The commission and I look forward to continuing our work together on behalf of the citizens of the region. We encourage anyone with an interest in these issues to find their own unique way to help—by volunteering at an agency, by mentoring a homeless family or individual, by donating money, food or clothing, or by advocating on behalf of the homeless.

Together, we can break the back of homelessness once and for all so that no man, woman or child will have to spend a night on the streets again.

*Horace Sibley*