

Community Snapshot

Westchester County, NY



February 2007

National Alliance to
END HOMELESSNESS

Progress in Ending Homelessness

Following a spike in the number of homeless families, Westchester County's Department of Social Services (DSS) began a process that transformed their response to homelessness. The county embraced three goals:

- To prevent the occurrence of homelessness where possible;
- To reduce the length of stay of those who become homeless; and
- To improve ways to move homeless people back into stable housing in the community.

With the continuing investment in prevention, expanding and enhancing housing placement and supportive services, and new strategies to help families pay for housing, the county experienced a dramatic decline in the number of children and families experiencing homelessness.

Key Initiatives

The transformation in Westchester focused on four key strategies:

Prevention. One of the first strategies the county adopted to respond to the increasing demand for shelter was expanding their homeless prevention efforts. The investment included dedicated staff in local TANF offices working with potentially homeless families to help them explore alternatives to entering shelter. The county also contracted a nonprofit organization to offer eviction prevention services to families working with TANF agencies located in areas with high homeless rates.

Rent Assistance/Increased Income. Two income support initiatives offered by the Westchester Department of Social Services (DSS) helped families experiencing homelessness pay for housing. Under an agreement with the state agency administering TANF, DSS increased the welfare benefit for homeless families by

Family homelessness decreased 57 percent—from 690 families in 2002 to 297 families in 2006.

creating a supplement to help them pay for housing. The income increase greatly enhanced families' ability to find affordable housing in the rental market and resulted in a quick drop in shelter use. Westchester DSS also offered a second rent supplement program, called the Rental Assistance Program (RAP), for working families transitioning off of TANF cash assistance. RAP serves as a bridge housing subsidy for families that expect to receive a Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher within one year.

Housing First Services. To minimize the time families spend in emergency shelter, DSS contracted with a nonprofit organization, Westhab, to provide Housing First assistance to homeless families. Westhab, the county's largest provider of shelter and transitional housing, helps families find housing they can afford in the community, negotiates with landlords, and provides home-based case management to help families stabilize in their new homes.

Consolidating and Enhancing Service Provision. The county improved the quality of services that families receive at the front end of the county's shelter system. Staff at a centralized case management center have expertise in domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse services. This ensures that service providers quickly link families with services that meet their specific needs, and providers utilize a strength-based perspective in their work with families.

Outcomes

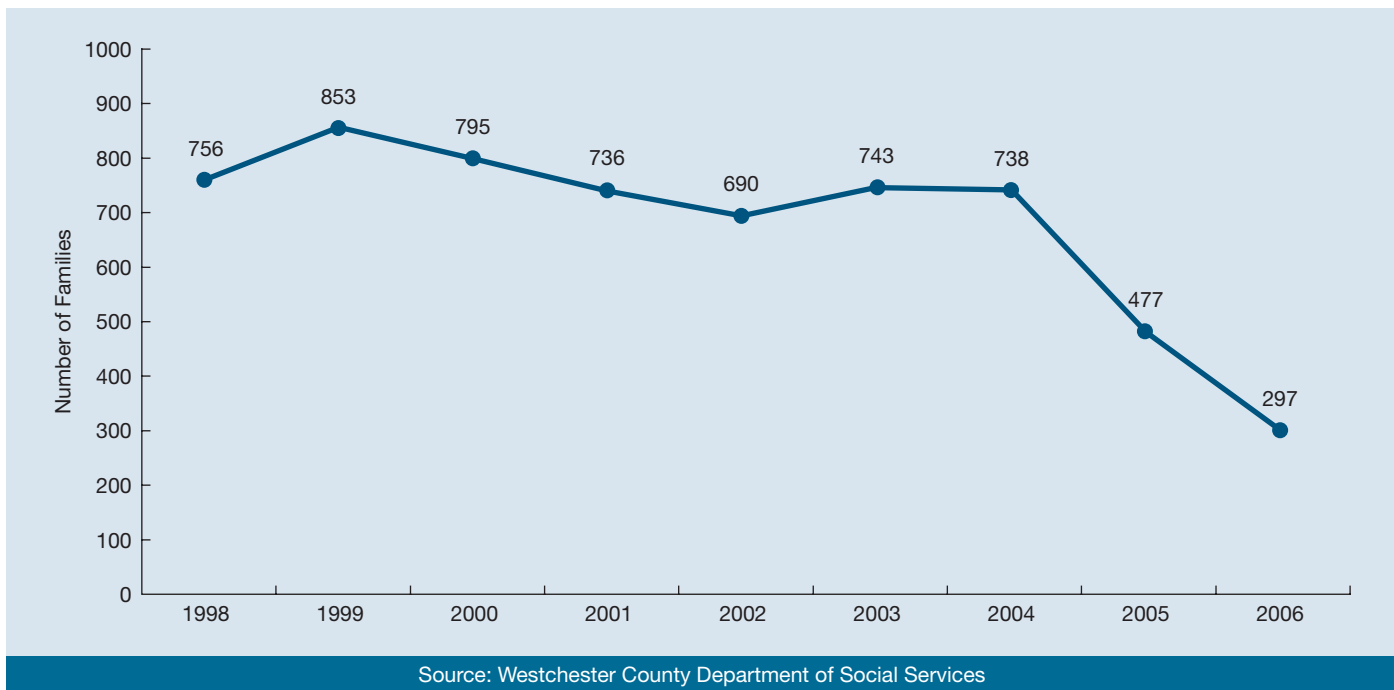
Income supplements for rental assistance and Westchester County's other key initiatives had clear results. Family homelessness decreased 57 percent from 2002 to



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2006—from 690 families to 297 families. Ninety-five percent of families that received housing assistance have not returned to the shelter system.

The decline in family homelessness means that Westchester County must explore “right-sizing” their shelter system as need for shelter has decreased. Transitional housing and shelter programs are increasingly shifting to permanent housing models and providing mobile services to families placed in private rental housing throughout the county. Because families have more income to find housing, fewer families need to rely on Housing First services to locate housing, and service providers can shift resources and target those services to families with greater needs.

Across the country, communities are making progress in ending homelessness. The National Alliance to End Homelessness *Community Snapshot Series* highlights strategies, programs, and innovations in these communities. To learn how to end homelessness in ten years, visit www.endhomelessness.org.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonprofit organization dedicated to solving the problem of homelessness and preventing its continued growth. Our mission is to mobilize all sectors of society in an alliance to end homelessness.