

Background Information:

Bridge Communities and Homelessness in DuPage

Nationally and locally, one third of those facing homelessness live in families.

This often does not fit the typical stereotypes.

- Most families that are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, are *working families*.
- Most family homelessness results from circumstances beyond their control - lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, and low employment wages.
- 92% of families entering Bridge last year were working either full or part time, yet still homeless or facing imminent risk of homelessness.



Solutions are complicated by the multiple definitions of homelessness.

- Homelessness comes in various forms:
 - o Literally homeless (living in shelters or places not intended for habitation)
 - o Imminent risk: losing your housing within 14 days
 - o Doubled up in unstable living spaces shared with friends or family
 - o Precariously housed/at risk – rent-burdened (defined as >30% of monthly household income going toward housing). Incoming Bridge families typically report 50%+ rent burden.
- Resources for homeless and housing insecure families are scarce, and most go to the literally homeless.
- In DuPage County, Bridge Communities is one of only a few nonprofits addressing family homeless (all forms listed above)

DuPage County has a persistent family “hidden homeless” challenge.

- Nationally, literal homelessness is falling, but more people are housing insecure than ever before, due to severe rent inflation, increased poverty, and lack of affordable housing.
- In DuPage, over the last year:
 - o 285 families with 594 children were identified as literally homeless
 - o 1932 children were identified as homeless by schools
 - o 15% of all DuPage households are precariously housed (overcrowded/rent-burdened).
 - o Among DuPage renters, 44% are rent-burdened, making our county second worst among Illinois’ 102 counties.
 - o A single mother with two young children would need to earn \$23.09 per hour at a full-time job to not be rent-burdened.

Bridge Communities is a rare and increasingly valuable resource.

- Trends in addressing homelessness make Bridge ever more valuable.
 - o Across the nation, led by the policies of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there is an ongoing shift from transitional housing to “rapid rehousing.”
 - o Rapid rehousing is less expensive but focuses entirely on providing *shelter only*.
 - o The model gets people off the street but perpetuates housing instability by not focusing the family on building financial strength or developing the capacity for self-sufficiency.
- In contrast, Bridge Communities focuses on creating long-term housing and family sustainability.
 - o Bridge Communities helps people in a housing crisis to achieve stability, then grow the skills, assets and confidence needed to change their life trajectory.
- Bridge Communities sustains its impact by maintaining its independence.
 - o Bridge values its program flexibility and funding model that relies on the generosity of the community at-large, limiting its funding from governmental sources that often require arduous compliance and restrictive homeless definitions.

The Bridge Communities program is comprehensive and effective in creating long-term change.

- Clients make significant progress:
 - Each year, Bridge provides transitional housing and holistic programming to more than 100 families.
 - Bridge helps to maximize each family's advancement, helping them to identify and manage their unique challenges, strengths, and goals.
 - Through reduced debt and sustained stable employment, in 2022 the two-year Bridge program helped clients raise their average income from \$28,000 to \$43,000 per year – a truly life-changing increment.
 - Last year 92% of graduates exited to permanent housing; in a recent longitudinal study 75% of graduates had never fallen behind in their rent or had caught up before negative action was taken.

Bridge Communities fields a distinctive, proven mix of programmatic elements:

- Client selection process
 - Each year, Bridge Communities receives inquiries from more than 500 families for approximately 40 open client family slots.
 - Clients are selected for the program based on strong work history and their desire to work collaboratively to increase their family wellbeing and long-term stability.
 - Most program families are headed by single mothers working one or more jobs.
- Transitional housing
 - Families live rent-free for two years in a Bridge Communities-owned apartment.
 - Each client's housing and service costs are shared by Bridge Communities and the program partner sponsoring the client.
 - The housing component makes it possible for clients to save the money they would otherwise spend on exorbitant rent and *invest it in their own futures* through credit repair, savings, employment and education improvements, and trauma counseling.
- Volunteer mentors
 - Each client family is sponsored by one of 36 program partner organizations (houses of worship, community organizations and corporations).
 - Program partner volunteers meet with their clients face-to-face weekly, to coach, monitor and celebrate their progress toward financial and family wellness goals.
- Comprehensive programming
 - In-agency programs help clients to stabilize their living situation and then achieve personal goals via services including professional case management, employment and education counseling, children's services, family wellness programs and donated automobiles.
 - Additional services are facilitated via community partners such as school districts and other agencies that provide clients with public benefits, childcare, food pantry distributions, behavioral and physical health services, parenting education and family law assistance.

To learn more about Bridge Communities' transformative housing programs and explore how you might help families transition from homelessness to self-sufficiency, please contact Jen Bystry, Director of Community Engagement at jenifer.bystry@bridgecommunities.org or 630.403.5095.