

The Heart of Homelessness

CHAPTER 4

...What is being done to find a permanent resolution to the homeless issue in Woodstock and McHenry County?

You may think: *“The City has done nothing to reduce the number of homeless people in Woodstock or control the behavior of those who are here. Not only do we have two PADS sites in Woodstock, but the City has created a larger problem by opening the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC) in the middle of downtown. We might as well put up billboards along the METRA line and tollway that say ‘Wanted: All Homeless...Woodstock will not only welcome you with open arms, we’ll take care of you.’ It’s ridiculous. Why should Woodstock taxpayers have to provide for the homeless population from all over McHenry County, the suburbs and Chicago, let alone put up with all of the problems? It’s about time somebody comes up with a real solution for McHenry County.”*

Here are the facts: City representatives have been in discussions with a number of entities regarding a broader, more comprehensive county-wide approach to the homeless situation since 2014. Those engaged in the conversations include:

- The McHenry County Housing Authority
- The McHenry County Mental Health Board
- Pioneer Center of McHenry County
- The McHenry County Continuum of Care to End Homelessness
- McHenry County PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter) site volunteers
- The McHenry County Council of Governments
- The McHenry County Chiefs of Police Association
- Various municipalities and townships
- Various churches
- Other interested parties

The purpose of the discussions was to move toward a permanent, fixed site center that would provide transitional housing and needed social services. Major questions included:

- What would be the cost establishing and maintaining a fixed site?
- Which entity would serve as lead agency?
- Would volunteers associated with servicing active PADS sites be willing to provide similar volunteer support at a fixed site facility? and
- Where should a fixed site facility be located?

Costs: Those early discussions led to specific efforts to estimate facility and associated service costs. A pro forma financial statement was developed with an estimated \$1 million property acquisition and \$800,000 initial facility development cost, along with a \$2 million annual operating budget for facility management and maintenance and the provision of associated social services.

Lead Agency: Given its history in McHenry County, its leadership of the county PADS program, and the mission of *“Meeting people’s most basic needs of food, shelter and support through programs designed for youth, families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness.”*, Pioneer Center was considered the appropriate lead agency for a fixed site facility.

Volunteer Support: The PADS program was initiated in McHenry County in 1988 when members of various churches throughout the county became concerned about the number of homeless individuals living in cars, wooded areas, in viaducts or under bridges. Church congregations were asked if they would be willing to serve as a host site one night per week for a PADS program from October 1 through April 30, 7:00 pm to 7:00 am, and provide individuals with dinner, a warm and secure place to sleep, and breakfast. Those congregations were overwhelmingly supportive and the McHenry County PADS program was launched.

Since that time, a number of area churches have served as PADS sites, routinely hosting 30 to 50 homeless individuals. Depending on the site, services often include showers and laundry facilities. Further, transportation is now provided from one community’s PADS site to the next day’s scheduled site in another community by Pioneer Center.

Church PADS sites rely solely upon volunteers who cook and serve meals, clean kitchen, restroom and shower facilities, and ensure blankets, sheets and mattresses are cleaned and laundered.

Recognizing the PADS program started within churches and there is an understandable sense of ownership and pride among congregations, there was initial concern that the volunteer base would be hesitant to give up their host site in favor of a fixed county site and would withdraw volunteer support. Upon conversation with volunteers, however, the majority of the volunteer base associated with current PADS sites expressed willingness to transfer their volunteer services to a fixed site facility.

Location: Local realtors were contacted to identify potential facilities in the county with adequate space and opportunity to accommodate up to 70 individuals and provide the essential elements of a check-in station, offices for confidential intake processing and administration, a common warming/cooling room, a single large dormitory sleeping room and 3-4 smaller family unit sleeping rooms, restroom and shower facilities, lockers for personal item storage, a kitchen, a washer and dryer, and storage areas. Sites were identified and one in particular was toured on three occasions to determine its viability. Ultimately, concerns over start-up costs and hesitancy of the property owner put further considerations on hold.

General Conclusions: The majority of volunteer groups associated with county PADS sites were willing to transition their efforts to a fixed site. However, administrative changes at Pioneer Center, high pro forma cost estimates, concerns over sustainable financing and an inability to locate an appropriate facility at a reasonable start-up cost were factors that discouraged action. As a result, dialogue regarding a fixed McHenry County site for the homeless faltered. It was at that time, in the face of growing demand from businesses and residents, conversations about a local effort in Woodstock began.

So what is happening now?

Currently, under the initiation and leadership of the City of Woodstock, in concert with several dedicated agencies, there is a vigorous and renewed effort to move toward a permanent, fixed site facility for the homeless in McHenry County. Specifically, four efforts are underway:

1. Many of the previously identified entities, along with others, met on November 15, 2017 and were advised that, while Woodstock and the McHenry County Housing Authority are grateful for the accomplishments of the Old Firehouse Assistance Center (OFAC), there are significant community concerns and challenges associated with its location. As a result, there is a strong and urgent need to identify and open a permanent, fixed site facility in the county.

While the OFAC will continue to serve people who are homeless on an interim basis and until a fixed site facility is identified and operational, it is not and cannot be a permanent solution. Those gathered understood the need to work together to find a larger more permanent county-wide resolution. Primary service agencies are now meeting regularly with a commitment to identifying and opening such a facility.

2. A meeting was held on December 18, 2017 with the Chairman of the McHenry County Board and County Administrator to emphasize the need and urgency for a fixed site homeless facility in McHenry County with the goal of having a facility operational as soon as possible. Conversations will continue at the County Board and administrative levels.
3. Another meeting was held on December 18, 2017 with leaders of the McHenry County Housing Authority, McHenry County Mental Health Board, McHenry County Community Development Department, and McHenry County Community Foundation to discuss funding a fixed site facility. It was generally agreed it was feasible to finance such a facility. Conversations will continue with the goal of opening a facility as soon as possible.
4. A meeting was held on December 19, 2017 with the Chief Executive Officer of the Heartland Realtor Organization regarding the need to identify sites and facilities for a fixed site for transitional housing and associated services. The organization offered its assistance and a search is proceeding.

Over the past decade, the economic downturn has created one of the most challenging periods in modern history and the effects have been felt at every level of society. With slow but steady improvement in the economy, there is renewed opportunity and enthusiasm to pursue the financial resources necessary to produce a county facility. ***Those working to address homelessness in our community will not be dissuaded until a permanent, fixed site facility to assist people who are homeless becomes a reality in McHenry County.***

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