

Tryon: Making progress on helping the homeless

By [Tom Tryon](#)

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So, local governments in Sarasota County hired an expert on homelessness, he wrote a report and nothing has been done since then, right?

Wrong.

True, a comprehensive solution to the most vexing and visible form of chronic homelessness -- involving adults on the streets -- has not been agreed upon, much less implemented. The lack of such progress is distressing but there are no reasons to give up or assume that nothing positive has happened since November 2013, when consultant Robert Marbut issued a 12-point plan.

Good things -- a significant number of them -- have occurred.

Perhaps most important and impressive, two emergency portals for families in crisis are open and operating.

That's right. The facilities are not in the planning stages; they are open and operating.

Creating one portal in north Sarasota County and another one in the south were two of Marbut's dozen recommendations. The idea is that families in crisis -- whether homeless or on the verge of becoming so -- need a safe place where they can stay temporarily, access the basic necessities of life (food, medicines, clothes, showers), stabilize and obtain vital social services.

With amazing speed, Harvest House Transitional Centers -- a faith-based organization in north Sarasota -- planned, implemented and opened a 24-bed, six-dorm emergency shelter for families.

The Harvest House Family Haven began taking in families Oct. 1, 2014. During its first five months, the haven provided shelter and comprehensive case management to 12 families -- 15 adults and 28 children. As an example of the demand: During February, all available units were occupied. What's more, in the first five months, an additional eight families were provided motel vouchers as they entered a case-management program. All told, in the five-month period, 87 families were served.

These numbers and those that follow are included in the most recent status report -- filed March 25 -- by Wayne Applebee, Sarasota County's director of homelessness services.

The need has not diminished: Through March 31, a total of 146 families with 330 children have been served.

The Catholic Charities Family Haven in South County opened March 6, with 10 beds in two units. The shelter became full within six days of opening. Additional families

needing services receive case management and motel vouchers.

Significant achievements.

What's more, in response to the substantial demand, the Sarasota Salvation Army added five more family-shelter units.

Although time will tell whether the outcomes warrant the community investments in these shelters, it's hard to imagine that they won't be better than the results that occur when families live in their cars or other substandard places -- and fail to receive the assistance they need to overcome the hardships associated with living on the edge of homelessness.

It's vital to recognize, as Jon Thaxton of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation told me last week, that Harvest House, Catholic Charities, seven other key organizations and various partners adapted Marbut's recommendations to take into account Sarasota County's needs and assets.

That approach has been taken on other recommendations. For example, the proposals to establish two master-case management systems -- one for adults; the other for families -- and the transformation of the Homeless Management Information System, from a static computer application to a proactive tool, have been tailored to local conditions. Those tasks, according to Applebee's report, are "substantially complete" -- although the lack of a single access point for homeless adults has hindered completion.

Another recommendation -- the establishment of a program to address summer food shortages among homeless and low-income families -- has been fully implemented. In fact, All Faiths Food Bank is in its second year of implementation; plus, the food bank has changed its mission to include partnerships with social-service agencies and public schools and libraries, providing the community with more bang for the buck.

The community and its service providers are making progress toward "moving from a culture of enablement" to one of engagement -- an effort to provide people with long-term, transformational assistance rather than short-term aid.

Perhaps just as important, Thaxton and others who have worked with providers point to this success: Key agencies are thinking collectively, tackling challenges together and breaking down bureaucratic barriers.

With the Community Foundation of Sarasota County (which helped raise another \$2 million to prevent family homelessness) the community has the capacity for progress. It has happened with children and families. Now, can the community channel these same resources and energies to work with chronically homeless adults?

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