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Needs Assessment

## **Chemical Dependency and Homelessness Needs Assessment**

### **Introduction**

In January of 2012 there were about 500 homeless individuals counted in Whatcom County. During the survey, the Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness asked participants about any disabilities their household had. The results concluded “the most prevalent disabling conditions were mental illness (30%), permanent physical disabilities (17%), chronic illness (14%), substance abuse disorders (10%), and developmental disability (9%).” (Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness, 2012, pp.13) It is an ongoing concern that chemical dependency and homelessness go hand in hand. An individual’s chances of becoming homeless increase when there is a pre-existing concern for chemical dependency; they also have higher chances of chemical dependency once becoming homeless. (Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness, 2012, pp.13)

### **Cause of Homeless**

Job loss, natural disasters, lack of resources for assistance, family deaths, or even institutionalization (due to mental health or other illegal activities) can result in homelessness. Societal contributions to this ongoing issue are also a strong concern. Lack of affordable housing, increased levels of poverty, or decreased employment rates all have the ability to alter the number of homeless individuals in any given community. In Whatcom County there isn’t enough family or male identified housing to fit the population’s current needs nor any full time

case managed housing units; these concerns are contributing to the growing issue of homelessness. (Crisis, n.d.)

### **Effects of Homeless**

For individuals suffering from chemical dependency the challenge of facing homelessness can seem almost impossible to overcome. Those who are caught in the struggles of homelessness have an increased chance of coming in contact with serious health conditions or infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and tuberculosis. Being homeless can also result in:

- “Loss of self esteem
- Becoming institutionalized
- Increase in substance misuse
- Loss of ability and will to care for oneself
- Increased danger of abuse and violence
- Increased chance of entering the criminal justice system
- Development of behavioral problems” (Issa, Mario, Mimi, n.d.)

### **Causes of Chemical Dependency**

Chemical dependency can be caused by many factors just as homelessness can. Biology, environment, and individual development can all take part in this process. In some cases individuals can be born with a particular set of genes that make them more susceptible to becoming addicted to drugs or alcohol. According to an article recently reviewed by Dr. Joseph Goldberg, MD, “the genes that people are born with – in combination with environmental

influences – account for about half of their addiction vulnerability.” (2012) A person’s environment can also bring in a number of influences ranging from stress, abuse (physical, mental, or sexual), socioeconomic status, family relations, peer pressure, and over-all perspective on the individual’s own quality of life. Lastly, the development of the individual as a person can also affect their likelihood of being more open to substance abuse. In some cases, where drug or alcohol consumption begins before an individual reaches adulthood, progressive usage will slowly turn into an addiction. As stated in “Drug abuse, addiction, and the brain” (an article reviewed by Dr. Goldberg), “...adolescent’s brains are still developing [in] the areas that govern decisions making, judgment, and self-control, they are especially prone to risk-taking behaviors, including trying drugs of abuse.” (WebMD, 2012)

### **Effects of Chemical Dependency**

Depending on the substance of choice, the effects can prove to be not only severe but also life threatening. Those who become addicted to or contribute to the misuse of alcohol are subsequently at risk of serious illness (such as cancer, liver disease, or heart failure), high blood pressure, decreased immunity, weight gain, and alcohol poisoning. Each of these potential consequences can easily lead to and increase the chances of becoming homeless. Drug addiction is also a large concern and can cause serious illness (such as coma, heart failure, cognitive impairment, seizures, or psychosis), depression, unpredictable and violent behavior, paranoia, or infertility. Combining any drugs with alcohol can even be fatal. (Bowels Center for Alcohol Studies, n.d.) On top of the extensive amount of health related risks with being involved in chemical dependency there are also plenty of social concerns. Isolation, impaired relationships with family and friends, institutionalization, increased violence and crime rates, and an individual’s ability to hold themselves professionally for work become more difficult to

maintain. These are all concerns I intend to incorporate into my program through a variety of methods.

### **What I don't know**

Although I have been able to collect a lot of relevant data regarding homelessness and chemical dependency, I have not gained much data specifically about those who are experiencing homelessness and chemical dependency in Whatcom County. To find more information about these individuals and the services they would like to see I could conduct an interview or a survey. For the interview I would be going up to random homeless persons, asking if they have a history of substance abuse or addiction, and ask (those who say yes and no) what they would like to see in terms of assistance to help them to regain ability to sustain a healthy life again. The survey would be very similar, it would also ask for history with chemical dependency or abuse and what they would like to see done to help them regain the ability to sustain a healthy life style. I would pass this survey out to homeless individuals I meet and at shelters. I would not expect them to return the surveys to me, but instead I will ask that they are returned to where they were picked up; from there I will return to the areas and pick up the filled out surveys. Since there are around 500 homeless individuals at Whatcom County I will only hope for as many as people are willing to give me. Ideally, I would like to accumulate a couple hundred.

I would also like to know more about the programs there used to be in Whatcom County related to my own. I couldn't find any information regarding case managed housing programs but have been informed it was done in the past but stopped not too long ago. To learn more about this I could interview and survey chemical dependency councilors and case managers in Whatcom County and hope to find more details about previous programs from them.

## **Current Programs**

Currently in Whatcom County there are tons of housing and chemical dependency programs. These can vary depending on your age and your gender. Opportunity Council, Whatcom Homeless Service Center, Bellingham/Whatcom County Housing Authority, Interfaith Coalition, Lydia Place, Catholic Community Services, and the Young Women's Christian Association all help the homeless population with housing concerns in Whatcom County. They are a few among many organizations that offer day shelters, transitional housing programs, permanent affordable housing, halfway housing, or emergency shelter programs. The list for substance abuse assistance is just as long. In Whatcom County alone there are at least 14 various organizations that offer a substance abuse program of some kind. These include Catholic Community Services, SEAMAR, Advanced Choices, Whatcom Counseling and Psychiatric Clinic, Whatcom Community Detox, and Bridges Treatment and Recovery. From the listed organizations above, the obvious pattern I can see in this is the lack of organizations that offer a combination of substance abuse case management and housing case management (Catholic Community Services is the only agency that has programs for both of these concerns).

## **Suggested Program**

My suggested program will consist of a house for individuals who are facing both chemical dependency and homelessness. It would have case managers that are available 24 hours every day, 7 days a week that remain at the house at all times. The success of my program will depend on a number of variables; these would include geographic location, budget, people and families living in the neighborhood, support from stakeholders, ability to reach out to the homeless population and advertise services, knowledgeable staff members, and the client's

ability to bring their life back together (which will be seen as no longer being chemically dependent, has a temporary/permanent home of their own, and is able to sustain healthy living conditions). This program will support and provide for clients to prevent escaping into unhealthy habits (i.e. homelessness and chemical dependency). Case managed housing will be an excellent program to help protect and encourage homeless individuals to work through their struggles and eventually find their way back to a normal life.

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