

***A Survey of Counties Participating in the Rural Homeless
Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio***

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Executive Summary

With recognition of the unique characteristics of rural homelessness and rural homelessness planning, the National Alliance to End Homelessness is embarking on an innovative new project with support from the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations. Seventeen Ohio counties are participating in the Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio (RHISCO), marking the first national plan to end homelessness in rural America.

The conclusion of 2006 also marks the end of the first three phases of the RHISCO project. In this initial year, county partners have been provided with a variety of services from the Alliance. *Phase One* was a period of assessment, during which Alliance staff gathered baseline and community data as a foundation for planning. *Phase Two* gathered partners for a day of data dissemination, networking, and additional guidance and information about participation in the project. In the last half of the year, counties developed community-specific plans to end homelessness with technical assistance and guidance from the Alliance during *Phase Three*.

This report offers a description of the RHISCO project as well as responses of those that have been most engaged in county homelessness planning. Despite the diverse histories of the county coalitions represented by the project, partners offered fairly consistent feedback to questions about their experiences thus far in their participation.

Several participants named the process of gathering participants for homelessness planning and making progress on a long-range plan as the most notable accomplishments of the initial planning year. A common challenge faced by county partners has been finding the time to meet regularly and to develop a sound plan.

In most counties, participants expressed a belief that their neighbors generally are not aware of the housing difficulties faced by many, but a majority are encouraged either by awareness raised by the RHISCO project or by the anticipated effect that the county plans will have on community awareness and education. Nearly all counties are making efforts to engage additional stakeholders in community planning.

Counties provided a positive view of the services they have received from the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Suggestions for future projects were primarily centered on adjusting timelines of services and tools that were offered to participants.

Phases of the Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio

Phase One of the Rural Homeless Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio (“RHISCO”) was comprised of a number of assessment activities during which staff from the National Alliance to End Homelessness (“the Alliance”) gathered data and information on the needs and assets of the seventeen partner counties in the RHISCO project area. Staff from the Alliance identified key local stakeholders and community leaders in the region for this data gathering. First, staff assessed each county’s community baseline needs. The methodology included face-to-face interviews with project contacts in each county and telephone interviews with other county and regional stakeholders.

The next component of the Assessment Phase was the completion of a stakeholder analysis for each county, for which Alliance staff identified a list of community members and sought local commitments to aid in regional plans to end homelessness. Stakeholders were drawn from seventeen county Continuum of Care coordinators; homeless service providers; academics; research and planning institutions; county executives; public agency and department heads; hospitals; business and civic leaders; law enforcement officials; housing developers and service providers; nonprofits and foundations; faith-based and community organizations; the general public; and homeless individuals and their families. Finally, Alliance staff administered surveys to gather information from stakeholders about the issues and challenges that each community is facing in ending homelessness. Upon the completion of this phase, Alliance staff drafted a number of reports that informed the subsequent Summit as well as the ongoing county planning processes.

For *Phase Two* of the project, staff from the Alliance facilitated a Planning Summit in Lancaster, Ohio and invited the primary and secondary contacts from each coalition to participate. Representatives from each of the seventeen counties attended the Summit and met with Alliance staff as well as local, state, and national collaborators. During this gathering, Alliance staff introduced themselves and explained their roles and provided a more extensive overview of the phases and timeline of the RHISCO project. County partners were also presented with the results from the Stakeholder Analysis developed in the Assessment Phase and were provided examples of successful models of active and completed plans from various communities around the United States. Participants were also introduced to Project Spaces, which is a website designed by the Alliance to provide a place for partner counties to post and

download documents relevant to the RHISCO project. A message board forum was also made available on the website for participants to communicate among themselves and to ask questions of Alliance staff and Continuum members from other counties.

During *Phase Three* of the project, communities have started to move forward with drafting plans to end homelessness. The Alliance provided a planning framework culled from the experience of planning initiatives around the country. This framework encouraged the communities to adopt strategies from the Ten Essentials, a checklist developed by the Alliance and used nationwide as a guide to assist communities with identifying solutions to ending homelessness. Counties were encouraged to review the information presented at the Planning Summit, including information on how to collect community-level data as well as guidance for engaging stakeholders through informational meetings and networking. The local project coordinator attended meetings of every housing coalition at least once to answer questions and to provide guidance on county-level planning. The Alliance also offered a plan template to assist with document organization; this tool was made available to participants through the Project Spaces website.

In September 2006, Alliance staff held two technical assistance sessions, held in Athens, Ohio, and Newark, Ohio, to provide partner counties with more in-depth training for plan writing. The sessions allowed participants to network with partners in other counties in the RHISCO project area and to generate new ideas for planning. Participants were also provided with information on liaison work and strategies to engage community stakeholders by a local consultant working with the project. Following the sessions, each county received a document that recorded the suggestions and ideas developed by participants during the day.

Phase Three will conclude on December 31, 2006, when county plans will be submitted to the Alliance and the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations. The project will continue with Phase Four in 2007 with implementation and regional planning.

County Descriptions

The seventeen counties participating in the Rural Homelessness Initiative of Southeast and Central Ohio (RHISCO) have entered into the project from a variety of capacities and with a range of resources. Considering these factors allows for a fuller understanding and

appreciation of county progress throughout this planning year. The following county descriptions provide a brief look at the trajectory of the coalitions from the beginning of Phase One through the beginning of December. The participating counties appear in alphabetical order.

In 1998, a small group of service providers began meeting in **Athens County** as a Continuum of Care to support the submission of a Shelter Plus Care grant and subsequently evolved into the Athens County Housing Coalition. A representative in this county noted, *"We started meeting again in 2004 in order to make us eligible for funding from the state and also to look at some other joint projects between some of the groups. Most of the groups who got involved and stay involved thought it was a good idea."* Since 1999, the Coalition has secured over \$1.5 million for funding homelessness projects. A subcommittee has been meeting monthly throughout the RHISCO project to focus on homelessness planning.

Delaware County was participating in several activities to address homelessness prior to its engagement in the RHISCO project. The county had had an existing affordable housing taskforce for a few years before developing a subcommittee in 2003 to focus exclusively on the needs of homeless persons. From this smaller group, a balance of state application was submitted and the county gained ten units of permanent supportive housing for homeless families, a milestone for this Continuum of Care. The group sees a small but consistent group of members and point in time counts have been conducted for the past three years. Since the inception of the RHISCO project, members of the Delaware Continuum have focused efforts more on homelessness planning. One member noted, *"A lot of activities with our Continuum have been going on for many years now and the RHISCO project has been able to crystallize our efforts and put a focus on where we are going in the future."*

The housing coalition in **Fairfield County** reformed around three years ago following a year and a half hiatus. The Metropolitan Housing Authority and Lutheran Social Services partnered to rejuvenate the group. A coalition member observed, *"We've had really good attendance and interest in it since we started and participation from a number of different agencies across the whole spectrum in Fairfield County."* The Coalition has completed point in time counts in each of the past three years and submitted a HUD grant for Shelter Plus Care vouchers in April, 2006. A representative noted, *"It's been a long evolution but we're pretty happy with where it's at now and the RHISCO project has kind of revitalized the whole process."*

The **Fayette County** Continuum of Care has been in place for several years. Since their initial engagement in the project, a member said, *“We’ve added some members. Before the RHISCO project we were just mainly looking at programs that we had, talking about funding availability, doing our point in time count. Since the RHISCO project started, we’ve been working on our long-term plan, so that’s been a big change.”*

The **Hocking County** Housing Coalition (HCHC) has its roots in the coalition of neighboring Athens County. A Hocking member working at a community mental health center was introduced to the Continuum of Care process in April, 2004 at an Athens County meeting. This participant and others in the county were facing sizable budget cuts in housing programs and were motivated to learn about balance of state funding, as well as how the development of a housing coalition could focus their efforts. The HCHC started in November, 2004, and has been meeting regularly with a small but consistent membership. The Coalition completed a point in time count in July of this year and will be conducting another in January, 2007. Hocking County has completed a strong plan that builds on a number of strengths that have been built over the course of their brief but vigorous tenure.

Jackson and Meigs Counties had an existing partnership prior to the RHISCO project and have continued this relationship as one entity throughout the planning process. This partnership began in the fall of 2004 when a mental health center looking to develop a Continuum of Care discovered an existing Housing Advisory Committee that had been formed as a requirement of a Block Grant program. One partner observed at an early meeting that, *“it’s the same people and we all need to be sitting around the same table.”* The two groups merged and have developed a three county Continuum with neighboring Gallia County. The group has been active in increasing membership through outreach to additional community stakeholders.

Knox County came to the RHISCO project with one of the longest histories of the participating counties. About 15 years ago, the Emergency Needs Coalition (ENC) formed to look at emergency needs of people in the county, including food pantries, soup kitchens, clothing items, and transportation issues, as well as housing and homelessness. The Knox County ENC is a collaboration of faith-based, government, and social service entities. Over the course of the last 15 years, the group started to focus more on housing and homelessness issues and the past six or seven years have been dedicated primarily to these topics. A Knox Coalition member reported, *“We’re a small but mighty group. There are not a lot of providers,*

but when everybody sits down at the table and we know we have a task to do, everybody's hearts are in it, knowing how we are going to best serve the community. So we've had probably a core group of about six to eight individuals who have spent a lot of time to get things situated and to figure out what are the programs that we need, what direction do we need to go, and fine tuning it."

Although the **Licking County** Housing Initiatives has been in existence in some form since the early 1990s, group members cite the period of 1994-1995 as a time when their Continuum of Care planning process was jumpstarted. At that time, the Continuum was expanding a transitional housing program and engaging in community planning in conjunction with the City of Newark. In the year prior to the RHISCO project, Licking was undertaking a similar planning process. A representative from this county observed, *"I think what we're all really still in the mix for is the interesting opportunity to take this to a more regional level and to have some good conversations with our surrounding counties."*

Changes in **Madison County** have been significant since initial engagement in the project. A member of this group reflected on the coalition's historical challenges with engagement, due in part to a lack of data. He noted, *"Just telling people that there is a homeless problem isn't enough. We have to be able to provide the data that says we have homelessness."* Better data collection has led to a broader awareness of the needs of persons and families in the county and plans for addressing these needs are starting to fall into place. *"There is now recognition that there is homelessness in Madison County. We've accepted that there is a problem and now we're embracing the plans for the future. We have a lot of resources in the community to address the "band-aid" issue when we find a homeless person, but there are no real cures in place, so that's what our plan is trying to get to."*

RHISCO partners in **Morgan County** count themselves among the coalitions that have developed as a result of participation in the project. A representative from this county described the benefits from this partnership by saying, *"We did not have a coalition, really, prior to the beginning of the project. We had just started the discussions. We were probably really unaware of the housing issues that were facing the counties and our awareness was raised by this process. The folks from the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations first started to raise our awareness of what some of the issues were in rural Ohio in terms of homelessness and through their grant process, we started organizing our Continuum of Care. Those things have unfolded*

over the course of the last calendar year. That's really where the project got legs and we do have, I think, every public agency and entity in the county that provides services to people with housing issues at the table and we're articulating our long-range plan."

By all accounts, the RHISCO project was also the primary motivator to develop a housing coalition in **Perry County**. A county commissioner explained, *"At the start of the RHISCO project, we had no coalition. We had no project. In fact, my comment has become infamous: until Terri [Donlin Huesman, of the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations] came into our community, we didn't have homelessness. Then, she told us that we did and we do!"* As the planning year started, Perry's housing coalition began to develop on the foundation of the Family and Children First Council (FCFC). The director of the FCFC said, *"We formed [the housing coalition] by opening it up to Council members and asking them to either themselves become a part of it or designate a staff member to become a part of it."* From this group, Perry has started a steering committee, which has been meeting regularly throughout the year to discuss homelessness planning.

Pickaway County had a strong Continuum of Care in place at the onset of their participation in the RHISCO project and had been meeting since 2002. A partner in this county noted, *"At the start of RHISCO, we had maybe 30 members and we've had that for years."* Another coalition member observed that three agencies have been providing leadership for the project and that they have enjoyed healthy participation from others in the community as they have developed their plan. *"We have had great input from our Continuum and we have had a great response from our faith-based summit group, which is homeless prevention. Overall, we have had wonderful cooperation."*

The **Ross County** Continuum of Care restarted in August, 2004 in an effort to secure additional funding from HUD for needed homeless services following a period of inactivity. A RHISCO partner recalled attending trainings from the Coalition on Housing and Homelessness in Ohio and starting to gather other interested providers. *"We put this Continuum of Care together and it seems to have been fairly well attended. The least we've ever had has been four or five people in a meeting and probably up to about 15. People have stayed involved."* The group met quarterly for a time but more recently has been meeting once a month. Another member of this coalition noted, *"Until we actually have a really strong project in place, we're going to keep meeting monthly and then maybe switch to quarterly."*

With a concern for the lack of affordable housing in **Union County**, the mental health board initiated the development of a housing coalition around four years ago with the assistance of the Coalition on Housing and Homelessness in Ohio and the Ohio Department of Mental Health. At the beginning of the RHISCO project, a member of the coalition explained, “*Outside of the HUD applications, it was kind of...a lot of good ideas. We were really struggling to try to get anything to move forward. A lot of discussion, a lot of data, a lot of statistics, but nothing really moving. No plans.*” Another member reflected that, “*Some of the things we heard at the very beginning [of the project] were things that we already knew how to do and were doing. I think it encouraged us. We were already making some things come to be, but this has really helped, especially for me. It’s given me a whole new wealth of information and data about housing and homelessness.*”

Vinton County has developed its first formal housing coalition as a result of its partnership in the RHISCO project. After a few loose gatherings over the years, a Vinton partner noted that, “*There’s never really been anything formal. I’m hoping that what we’ve created now will stick around for awhile.*” Vinton started by creating a core group from the agencies that provide housing assistance in the county. The next step was to have each of these agencies spearhead a subcommittee based on the priorities that had been identified for the county. These groups expanded participation to the larger community by inviting a number of area stakeholders to engage in focus groups, thereby gathering input and information for the county plan. Within the original core group, a draft plan was developed; the larger group will review the plan for feedback and a final draft will be completed by the end of the calendar year.

Washington County has had a Continuum of Care in place for nearly nine years, starting with a Shelter Plus Care project. While the group normally meets quarterly, gatherings have occurred monthly since the start of RHISCO. Washington made efforts to engage community stakeholders through a homeless forum held in October. This event was attended by several individuals not previously engaged in community conversations about homelessness. A member of this Continuum noted that they have been “*trying hard to focus on priorities,*” as well as to maintain the momentum from initial participation in the project.

County Accomplishments

When RHISCO partners were asked about the most significant accomplishments achieved in the initial year of the project, nearly all spoke of gathering together a group and engaging in conversation on homelessness planning. A representative from Athens County said that a notable highlight of the year was, *“getting everyone together to agree on one thing and setting up needs and goals. This has really helped us focus.”* In Ross County, a partner new to the coalition noted that some members had been meeting sporadically for over ten years, *“but this is the first time that I feel like they’ve made some concrete progress and have a road map now. Before, they were meeting and talking, but nothing went beyond that.”* Coalition members in Ross County are now meeting monthly. A Union County representative noted that receiving guidance from the National Alliance to End Homelessness has encouraged organization within their coalition and that the added structure has enabled the group to make decisions more efficiently.

County partners identified an additional highlight of participation in the RHISCO project as the ability to raise awareness of housing issues throughout their communities and to change the common perception of homelessness. Morgan County created a Homelessness Resource Guide to distribute to various agencies and businesses in the area, enabling community members to help others in need. When Fairfield County completed their point in time count, they found over 200 people that could be considered homeless. The provision of solid data to the community has stimulated interest in homelessness and housing matters with important stakeholders. An outreach campaign using local media outlets has been successful in raising community awareness in Knox County. A partner from this coalition noted, *“We’ve gotten two articles published in the two papers around the county. We’ve done three radio shows, including some call-ins where people could ask questions.”* The group recognizes the importance of reaching a broad sampling of the community through these avenues, as this level of support will be critical to implementation of future homelessness planning.

Challenges

A great majority of counties provided closely related responses to a question about challenges faced during the first year of the RHISCO project. In several ways, participants described the challenge of feeling pressed for time. Some participants reflected this by

explaining that a committed few are consistently doing a bulk of the labor, a challenge that is amplified by a revolving door of additional members. While all of the participating counties seek increased participation, some described the challenges that accompany an inconsistent membership. A representative in Delaware County observed that their coalition is “*spending a lot of time at meetings going over the last meeting and bringing people up to speed. And when you have to do a [point in time] count and you need to update your inventory, it falls to a few people every time.*” This thought was echoed in Hocking County, where success in vigorous recruitment efforts also can have the unforeseen challenge of needing to spend significant time reviewing basics for newcomers.

Representatives in nearly all counties said that they had experienced difficulties in finding time to meet and in juggling the responsibilities of a full-time job with staying active in their county’s housing coalition. “*Many folks say they really want to be a part of it, but they just don’t have the time or the staff,*” noted a participant in Perry County. “*I think that’s always an issue in a small community like this, you see the same eight to 12 people at every meeting.*” A county partner in Knox observed that rural agencies seem less likely to have positions solely focused on homelessness issues than do agencies in larger municipalities, which may leave rural staff more stretched in terms of roles and community participation. Similarly, a representative in Licking responded, “*Most people in this town who come to community meetings are wearing two or three hats, so we have to be really careful with their time.*” Others spoke specifically of the challenge in developing a plan in the time allotted. A participant from Union observed, “*This is a big plan, and basically in a few months, you’re writing something that’s supposed to, although it may change, we’re talking ten years out. That’s a huge deal to do in a very short amount of time. I think that’s one of the biggest hurdles.*”

Community Perceptions of Homelessness

Capturing public perceptions of homelessness and housing matters is a critical step for counties seeking community support of plans to end homelessness. While few counties have formally surveyed community members about the perceived degree of need, a majority report that their neighbors lack an understanding of the type of housing insecurity faced by many. A Delaware participant recalled, “*[Members of local government] are astonished if I talk about our direct housing program and that we’ve served 40 homeless families per year since 2001. They don’t even know it exists. A lot of people don’t. It kind of stays under the radar.*” Several

participants noted that the greatest level of awareness is found with other service providers who are meeting face to face with those precariously housed but that this recognition has yet to filter to the general public. However, many expressed the belief that knowledge of those doubled up in housing with family or friends is widespread among community members; most acknowledged that few in the community regard this as being homeless. Several spoke of the cultural norm of caring for one's own. A Pickaway coalition member observed, *"What we have is Grandma having three sets of adult kids with their kids living on the couches because they don't have anywhere else to go. And then, of course, Grandma loses her housing because she's got too many people living with her. But in poverty, we don't let our kids not live with us unless they've burnt a bridge."* Another participant said, *"I think it's more of the Appalachian community culture that we want to take care of our own and we pull them in and that's how we sort of do it a lot of times."*

Several counties have been encouraged by the impact that participation in the RHISCO project is having on community awareness of homelessness and housing. Members of the housing coalition meeting in Jackson and Meigs Counties reported, *"We sure have had a lot of articles in the newspaper. We've had great cooperation. They've all been above the fold, with pictures, two different reporters. They come to our meetings and ask good questions. We have definitely tried to raise community awareness."* In Knox County, a coalition member cited *"being able to say that we were one of 17 counties chosen to work on this project...something like that gets our elected officials' attention."* Hocking County, a group that began the project with a solid foundation, reported, *"When we began, almost to a T, you could say that people in Hocking County believed there were no homeless people in Hocking County. We have been able to put some media out there... so there are more people who are now aware that we really do have homeless people in this area and that there are needs. I believe we've had a lot of impact."* Many others expressed a belief that a significant impact on community awareness was imminent, citing plans of attracting attention to the needs of the homeless and at-risk by way of unveiling their ten year plans.

Engaging Stakeholders

Nearly all of the participating RHISCO counties have made efforts to engage additional community stakeholders to their planning processes. Several representatives reported that they had held working breakfast or lunch meetings in which stakeholders in attendance were

introduced to the factors of rural homelessness and given information about the goals of the RHISCO project. Some counties held discussion sessions in which invitees could ask questions and offer input for developing their county's plan to end homelessness. A representative from Knox County explained, *"We had almost 90 people when we did our breakfast meeting... We had two of our three commissioners and we had our mayor at the table. We've gotten some people that said, 'We don't have any homeless,' that are finally coming to this table and saying, 'We do and where else can we pitch in?'"* A partner from Madison County noted that hosting a stakeholders meeting enabled their Continuum of Care to identify untapped in-county resources and to encourage community members to become more involved in the planning process. At the stakeholder meeting in Washington County, a participant reported, *"We had all the stakeholders there and then we also had the community... people not normally engaged."*

A few counties have focused on increasing involvement specifically among various churches and clergy in the faith-based community. Fayette County named November, 2006 "Minister Month" and sent postcards to every church in the county to invite members to attend a Continuum of Care meeting. In Pickaway County, rather than a one-time event, coalition members assembled an ongoing committee of faith-based community members that are meeting biannually to contribute to the planning process. A partner from this coalition explained, *"We call it 'It Only Takes a Spark.' It involves every church and every agency in the county. We meet in May and November each year. We just had our follow-up meeting in November and we reported on the progress of the ten year plan."* Many are actively participating in the county's Continuum of Care meetings as a result of participation in the "It Only Takes a Spark" event. A county participant credits the RHISCO project with bringing this group to fruition.

Services from the National Alliance to End Homelessness

Counties participating in the RHISCO project offered an affirming view of the range of services they have received from the National Alliance to End Homelessness. The service most often praised by partner counties was the direct involvement of the local project coordinator. A representative from Vinton County noted that the coordinator has been supportive on several levels and that her follow-up and feedback have helped guide their coalition in the right direction. A partner from Athens County reflected that the most helpful attributes the project director offers are, *"having someone to evaluate our plan and having somebody involved in what we're doing*

who is actually there in person face-to-face helping us and knowing that there is someone actually out there paying attention.”

Project Spaces was another Alliance service identified by county partners as useful to county homelessness planning. This website allows participants to log in to view and upload documents and communicate with other county partners. A Perry County representative replied, *“I’ve gone there and looked at all the documents that were there, and I’ve downloaded things, and I found contact information for people from other counties that have become great resources.”*

In September 2006, two technical assistance sessions were offered to allow RHISCO partners to meet, discuss the project, and brainstorm means to achieve the goal of ending homelessness in their counties. Several participants identified this gathering as one of the most valuable services received from the Alliance. A partner in Pickaway County noted that this session informed them how they could increase involvement from local stakeholders within their county and allowed them the opportunity to network with participants from counties with different approaches.

Also in September, a template was provided by the Alliance to assist counties with organizing and drafting their plan documents. Several participants identified this as a valuable tool. A few noted that receiving the template earlier in the process may have assisted them with organizing conversations on planning and implementation. Other suggestions for how a similar project could be implemented in other rural locations included an earlier description of the “big picture” for the project and additional information on how county plans would be incorporated into a regional planning process. As the RHISCO project continues with Phase Four, the Alliance will turn its efforts to developing a regional planning process.

Next Steps for Counties

County partners in the RHISCO project cited a variety of changes or improvements they would like to see occur in their housing coalitions. The most common response was an expression of hope for additional stakeholders committed to the cause of addressing homelessness. In Morgan County, a coalition member explained, *“There are times when we have everybody at the table and everybody’s engaged and interested and active and then we*

go through a period where they kind of lose interest. Then we have to do something to rekindle that again.” A few participants named specific individuals or agencies from which they are seeking representation. Newer coalitions were more likely to say that they hoped to simply stabilize and to continue planning and learning. Third, a smaller number of participants noted that they need to explore additional funding opportunities in order to create a more sustainable plan. A participant in the Jackson/Meigs coalition replied, *“I’d like to be able to take better advantage of grants and monies that are out there that I don’t know how to take advantage of yet. Maybe we could collaborate.”*