

Families and Homelessness in Florida

A REPORT FROM THE BOB GRAHAM CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

CIVIC SCHOLARS PROGRAM, FALL 2011



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The logo features a dark blue rectangular background. In the center, there is a light blue silhouette of the state of Florida. Behind the silhouette, a series of thin, light blue lines radiate outwards from a point just above the state, creating a sunburst effect. Overlaid on this graphic is the text "BOB GRAHAM CENTER" in a large, white, serif font. Below this, the words "FOR PUBLIC SERVICE" are written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

BOB GRAHAM CENTER

FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

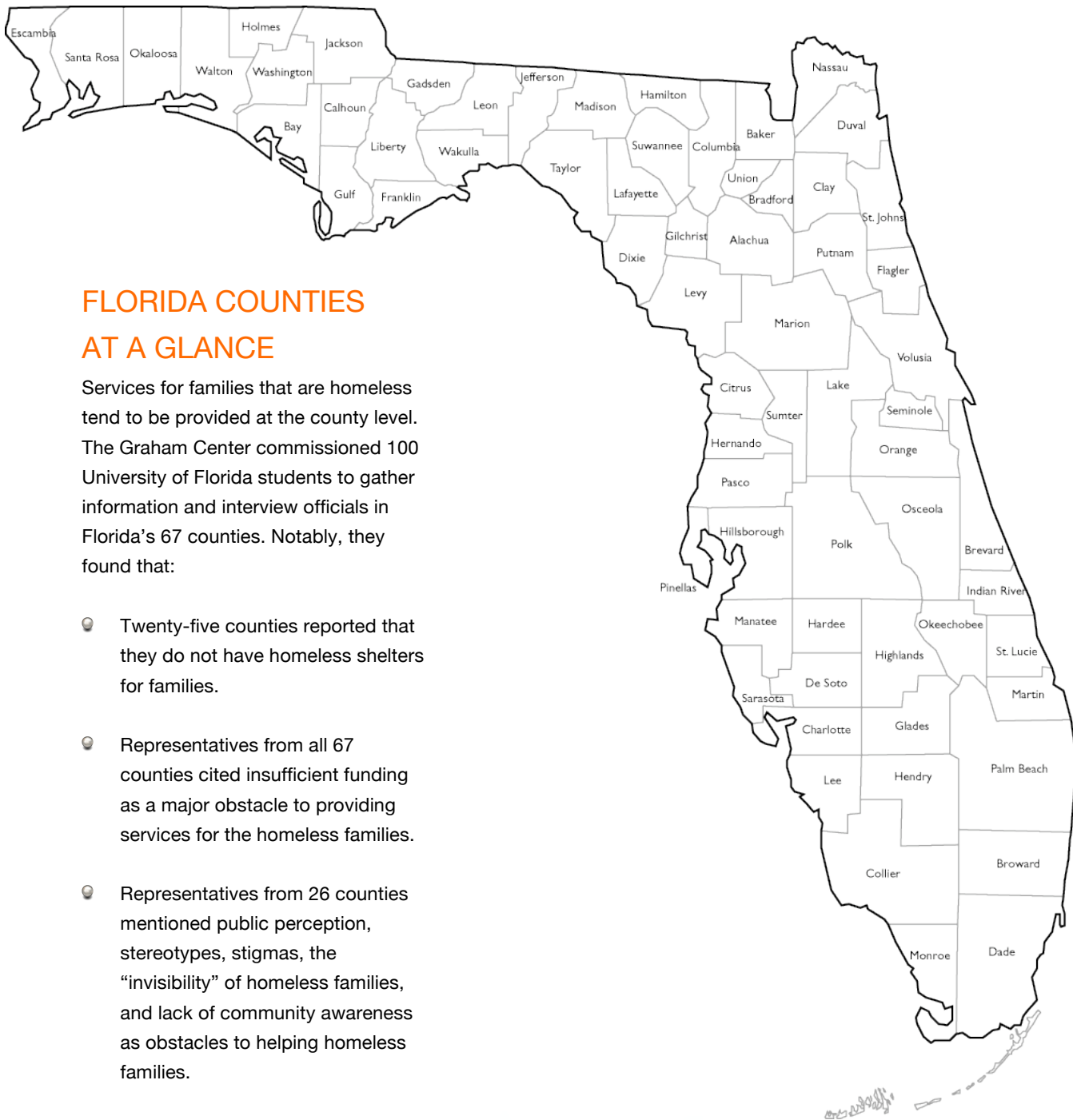
The Bob Graham Center for Public Service is a community of students, scholars, and citizens who share a commitment to training the next generation of public and private sector leaders for Florida, the United States, and the international community. Former Florida Governor and United States Senator Bob Graham founded the Center as a means of going beyond the classroom and giving students insight into the nuts and bolts of political leadership.

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

represent one of the fastest growing homeless population nationally and in Florida. According to the 2011 Report of the Florida Council on Homelessness, Florida has the third largest number of persons who are living on its streets or in emergency shelters with nearly 60,000 people fitting this description. This figure does not include the 49,000 children that Florida public schools identified as being homeless during the 2009-2010 school year. Additionally, according to U.S. Census data, between 2009 and 2010, the number of children in poverty living in Florida increased by 72,000 for a total of 924,000 or 23.5% of all children in the state. The national average is 21.5%.

In the fall of 2011, the Bob Graham Center for Public Service commissioned 100 students to gather information and interview officials in Florida's 67 counties on the issue of families and homelessness and report their findings in 6-8 page papers. In January of 2012, a group of 45 Civic Scholars convened for a roundtable discussion of the biggest problems and potential solutions to those problems. This report serves as a summary of those problems and solutions.





FLORIDA COUNTIES AT A GLANCE

Services for families that are homeless tend to be provided at the county level. The Graham Center commissioned 100 University of Florida students to gather information and interview officials in Florida's 67 counties. Notably, they found that:

- Twenty-five counties reported that they do not have homeless shelters for families.
- Representatives from all 67 counties cited insufficient funding as a major obstacle to providing services for the homeless families.
- Representatives from 26 counties mentioned public perception, stereotypes, stigmas, the "invisibility" of homeless families, and lack of community awareness as obstacles to helping homeless families.



MAJOR PROBLEMS.

Civic Scholars identified the top county-level problems related to the issue of families and homelessness.



POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS.

For each problem, Civic Scholars proposed possible solutions or ideas for mitigating the problems.



MAJOR PLAYERS.

Civic Scholars identified and interviewed those at the county level who provide services for homeless families.

Introduction

At the Bob Graham Center for Public Service, we believe civic engagement means developing the critical knowledge and practical skills needed to be aware and active participants in our communities, whether they are local, state, national, or global. To this end, the Bob Graham Center provides grants to University of Florida (UF) students to conduct research on critical public policy issues. In the fall of 2011, the Center commissioned 100 students to gather information, interview local officials, and write county-level reports on the issue of families and homelessness. In addition to providing context and discussing the quality of services for families experiencing homelessness in his or her assigned county, each Civic Scholar was asked to identify the top three or four problems related to families and homelessness in his or her county and propose possible solutions to those problems. This report serves as a cumulative summary of those issues and solutions.

The issue of families and homelessness represents a critical public policy issue, especially in Florida, and was an easy choice when we sat down to select the topic of research for the fall 2011 Civic Scholars. The Florida Department of Children and Families (FDCF) (2011) reports that nearly 60,000 Floridians are homeless, giving Florida the designation of having the third largest population of persons who are homeless in the nation. To be sure, the great majority of persons who are homeless are single persons or households without children. However, for 2011, 26.6% of the total homeless population was households *with* children. Below are the top problems related to this population across five categories – housing, the economy and funding, services, image, and other – as well as proposed solutions or ideas for mitigating those problems. The ultimate goal is to decrease the number of families entering this population, improve the quality of service and level of care for those families who already hold membership in this population, and help such families find their way out of this population.

Top Problems and Proposed Solutions

Housing

According to the Council on Homelessness 2011 Report, issued by the FDCF, the cure to the homelessness epidemic in Florida is jobs and housing. As the report asserts:

Our state and nation must focus on creating good jobs. Without a stable income, individuals and families are not able to afford to sustain their own housing. The state must increase the supply of low cost rental housing to meet the growing demand. Florida must get our citizens back to work. Without jobs that provide incomes sufficient to afford market-rate housing costs, Florida must make affordable housing available to households at the lowest income levels. Although there is now an oversupply of rental housing in some areas of the state, this housing is not attainable to most households with incomes below 40% of the area's median income [...] Providing emergency rental assistance will keep families from becoming homeless, which is cost-effective for the community in the short and long term. (pp. 1-2)

Many of the county-level Civic Scholar reports identified problems related to housing. These problems included lack of affordable housing in the area, lack of transitional housing, high foreclosure and eviction rates, the high cost of utilities, lack of shelters for families, no daytime housing, and zoning issues that prevented shelters, transitional housing, and low-cost housing from being built.

When the Civic Scholars convened for a roundtable discussion of their findings and recommendations in this category, they decided to focus on the lack of affordable housing and the lack of shelters for families. For the former, they proposed increased funding for programs that help families pay rent or make their mortgage payments on time. As the Civic Scholars noted, it is far more cost-efficient to help a family stay in their home than it is to provide housing and other services for that family once they become homeless. Additionally, they proposed property tax deductions, especially in counties such as Miami-Dade, Broward, and West Palm Beach where the rates are particularly high. According to the Civic Scholars, such a move would save money in the long run as more families would be able to pay their taxes and fewer families would require assistance. For the latter, they proposed that counties provide

more preventive services, which stemmed from the same logic as their proposals related to the lack of affordable housing. They were particularly energetic about the potential for public-private partnerships, community-based organizations, and faith-based programs to teach life skills and financial planning and to help families stay in their homes.

The Economy and Funding

Florida has not been immune from the Great Recession. On the contrary, Floridians disproportionately experienced the effects of the housing bubble collapse. Many found themselves unable to make their mortgage payments and for those that could, a large number now find that their homes are worth much less than the note. Worse still, many Floridians found themselves unemployed as their construction or construction-related jobs disappeared. In fact, as of February 2011 Florida ranked second in the nation in the number of home foreclosure filings and from January 2008 to January 2011, the unemployment rate in Florida increased from 4.8 to 11.9% (FDCF, 2011).

When the Civic Scholars discussed this category, they decided to focus their attention on insufficient funding to provide services for families that are homeless. They proposed that counties hire skilled grant writers or partner with local colleges and universities in order to be more competitive for state and federal grants. In turn, grant money could be used to fund drug rehabilitation programs, provide prevention services for those experiencing crisis poverty, build additional transitional shelters to decrease the long wait times that homeless families experience, and open one-stop service centers that offer comprehensive care and resources.

Services

One of the most pressing issues facing homeless families is a basic lack of knowledge of and access to supportive resources and services, from health care to housing and from nutrition programs to transportation (FDCF, 2011), not to mention that parents fear losing their

children if it becomes known that they are homeless. This problem is exacerbated by the inability of various service providers to communicate among one another, much less effectively communicate their services to homeless populations. For this reason, in their 2012 budget recommendations the Florida Council on Homelessness requested over \$12 Million to address the continued need for services at the community level, and to maintain the service capacity of the agencies and organizations providing these essential services. Unfortunately, the Florida House passed an appropriations bill that removes state grants for local homeless coalitions, the very coalitions that provide communication between service providers and, in turn, effectively communicate services to homeless populations. Specifically, the House budget eliminates \$2,377,083 in Homeless Coalition and Challenge Grants (Lopez, 2012).

Naturally, one of the best ways to improve communication about services for homeless populations would be to restore funding to local homeless coalitions. Barring such a restoration, the Civic Scholars proposed that local officials improve informatics by creating centralized databases of services. Such a database would enhance the ability to provide services and serve as a source of more reliable data for research. Of course, creation and maintenance of a centralized database would require funding, although not in the millions of dollars. In order to improve the ability of service providers to communicate directly with homeless families, the Civic Scholars proposed that materials be distributed in public places, that law enforcement officials be educated so that they can provide information, that a public Internet database be created, and that agencies collaborate so that they can provide information about services that may be obtained from other providers.

Image

Many service providers feel “their work is constrained by a lack of public awareness of the existence of child, youth, and family homelessness in communities throughout the state”

(FDCF, 2011, p. 30). Worse, there is a strong and enduring negative public perception of homeless families and individuals, replete with misguided stereotypes, strong stigmas, and subsequent failure to work toward fixing the problem or supporting increased funding. It is no wonder that homeless families are referred to as the “invisible homeless” even though nationally they are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (p. 7).

On this issue, the Civic Scholars had much to say. They proposed that public school systems sponsor programs that allow students to contribute to their own homeless classmates, while still allowing anonymity for the homeless children. They also proposed that schools educate middle and high school students about the services available for homeless families, regardless of the student’s living situation; that is, educate *all* students. In order to positively influence public opinion, the Civic Scholars proposed public campaigns to raise awareness of both the issue of homelessness and the services that are available for families that are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. To that effect, they specifically recommended that providers recruit community opinion leaders, such as religious leaders, local politicians, and even local sports figures and celebrities, to speak to the issue of families experiencing homelessness and inspire a call to action on their behalf. Lastly, they recommended that communities educate law enforcement officials using examples of families that fell on hard times through no fault of their own (i.e., job lay-offs, sick child, etc.). This is especially important as law enforcement officials regularly come into contact with homeless populations and are often the first to identify homeless families.

Other

The fifth group at the Civic Scholars roundtable discussion was tasked with discussing miscellaneous issues related to families experiencing homelessness, such as poor education for homeless children, lack of programs for older children, lack of affordable healthcare, lack of

prevention services, lack of public transportation, and lack of health and dental care. They decided to focus their discussion on the lack of prevention services and the lack of public transportation, two important issues that were prevalent in many Florida counties, especially the smaller, more rural ones.

For the first issue, lack of prevention services, the group joined many of their peers in calling for financial assistance to pay for rent and utilities. Again, as they noted, “It is a lot cheaper to keep a family out of homelessness than it is to help them once they are homeless.” They also proposed modified housing applications (whether they be for shelters, transitional housing, or subsidized rental units) that eliminate the requirement of a home address and computer courses that teach about responsible home ownership and responsible renting. For the second issue, lack of public transportation, the Civic Scholars proposed regular bus service, expanded schedules, better stop locations, inter-county transit (as many homeless families must travel to other counties for work or to receive homeless services), a carpool system, and a subsidized charter system that allowed a limited number of free or reduced-priced rides. They indicated that some Florida counties already have such programs in place and that they are highly popular.

Major Players

As a major component of their research, the Civic Scholars were asked to identify major players – interest groups, agencies, and other organizations – that have a stake in the issue of families and homelessness in Florida. At the highest level, the federal government and the Florida Legislature represent the two most important players as they provide the most funding for homeless services. Next, the Florida Council on Homelessness serves as the most important advocacy group for Florida’s homeless. It comprises 19 members representing 13 state-level departments, agencies, and organizations, as well as the Governor’s office (see

Appendix B). At the county level, the Civic Scholars identified a number of other key players that are charged with or have chosen to provide services for homeless families.

Broadly speaking, the major players include homeless persons and families themselves, faith-based organizations, non-profits, city and county governmental agencies and officials, and county residents. More specifically, across the counties the Civic Scholars noted that many familiar state-level organizations work to prevent homelessness or provide services for families experiencing homelessness. They include, but are not limited to, the Salvation Army, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Community Services, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the public school systems (as required by federal law). On a county-by-county level, they identified local organizations. For example, in Palm Beach County alone, 135 organizations have been identified as currently serving the homeless. Despite the size of Palm Beach County (with 1.3 Million residents, it is the third largest county in Florida behind Miami Dade and Broward), this is a phenomenal amount of organizations working on behalf of the homeless. Nonetheless, the homeless families of Palm Beach County and the other 66 counties in Florida would surely benefit from increased funding and greater collaboration among the major players.

Conclusion

In a keynote address to the Florida Keys chapter of American Civil Liberties Union in February of 2012, activist and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, *author of Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, spoke about the criminalization of poverty and referred to Florida as a “terrible state” for being poor or homeless. Specifically, it is illegal sleep on the beach or in any other public space, sit on a sidewalk, loiter, lie down, panhandle, or engage in any other activity that is essential to survival when one has no home. To make matters worse, those who

are homeless have a difficult time finding work, as many employers do not want to hire someone currently out of work. As Ehrenreich stated, “There is no ladder climbing out of poverty. What there is amounts to a greased chute. Once you start sliding down, you go faster and faster” (Filosa, 2012).

To be sure, the best hope for improving the condition of homeless families in Florida is substantial and rapid growth of the state’s economy. A stronger economy translates to more jobs, more tax dollars, and more funding. In the absence of such growth, the state and counties must do more with less to serve this growing segment of the homeless population. The major problems identified in this report are a good place to start, and the solutions proposed in this report can serve as powerful discussion starters. In the meantime, as Ehrenreich asked, “Could we stop the meanness, the relentless persecution of people who are already having a hard time?”

References

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Appendix A – Top Problems Reported

| Issue | Number of Counties |
|---|--------------------|
| Lack of shelters for families..... | 25 |
| Insufficient funding..... | 23 |
| Current recession, unemployment, and/or low wages..... | 23 |
| Lack of affordable housing..... | 22 |
| Public perception, stereotypes, and/or stigmas..... | 17 |
| Lack of prevention services and education..... | 10 |
| Invisibility of homeless and/or lack of community awareness..... | 9 |
| Lack of transitional housing..... | 9 |
| Poor education of homeless children..... | 9 |
| Lack of public transportation..... | 9 |
| No service center..... | 8 |
| Insufficient records and/or no clear definitions..... | 8 |
| Lack of communication among service providers..... | 5 |
| Lack of affordable health and dental care..... | 5 |
| High foreclosure and/or eviction rate..... | 3 |
| Lack of programs for older children who are homeless..... | 3 |
| Lack of affordable childcare..... | 2 |
| Inability to communicate information about homeless services..... | 2 |
| Lack of case management..... | 2 |
| New face of homelessness..... | 2 |
| No daytime assistance..... | 1 |
| High cost of utilities..... | 1 |
| Zoning issues..... | 1 |
| Crisis poverty..... | 1 |
| Poor personal choices..... | 1 |
| Domestic abuse..... | 1 |
| Legal or financial barriers for advocates..... | 1 |

Appendix B – Representation on the 2010-2011 Florida Council on Homelessness

Department of Children and Families

Department of Community Affairs

Department of Health

Department of Corrections

Department of Veterans' Affairs

Workforce Florida, Inc.

Florida Housing Finance Corporation

Agency for Health Care Administration

Florida Coalition for the Homeless

Florida Supportive Housing Coalition

Florida League of Cities

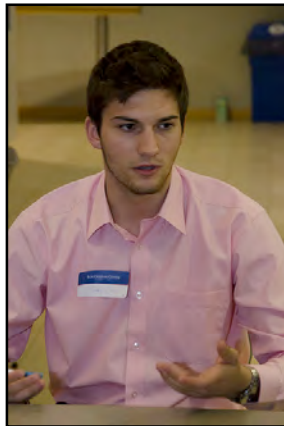
Florida Association of Counties

Florida Department of Education

CIVIC SCHOLARS ROUNDTABLE

Pugh Hall Ocora

January 26, 2012



Contributing Civic Scholars

Dylan Attal
Kristen Augustine
Deina Bossa
Julia Castle
Christian Chessman
Sabin Ciocan
Matthew Corkery
Alexander Cornillie
Rozelle Cortero
Daria Deringer
Emily Diehl
Darlena Duryea
Jenna Earl
Amira El-Behiri
Desiree Fernandez
Sara Fruithandler
Ashley Hawes
Bardia Khajenoori
Melody King
Sarah Kleinman
Danielle Lanza
Latasha Lawson
Seung Lee
Sergeine Lezeau
Alex Masi
Lauren Michaels
Karla Mundim
Roberta Roberts
Julia Rowe
Alex Salamanca
Samantha Sexton
Courtnei Smith
Amber Todoroff
Megan Turner
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Jennifer Winter
Stephanie Zarkis



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