2012 Annual Report on Homeless Served in Dane County
Executive Summary

The 2012 Annual Report on Homeless Served in Dane County is an annual report prepared by the City of Madison's Community Development Division. It compiles data, collected by housing and service providers that operate in the county, which helps to describe the population of persons who have received or sought housing or support services during the year. The report seeks only to summarize and present data on homelessness, not postulate on its causes or offer solutions. It is believed, however, that the information presented here can be useful to policy makers in efforts to analyze service needs, shape community responses to those needs and measure progress toward meeting policy goals.

It is clear that homelessness remains a significant problem in Dane County. That said, there are complications in trying to draw firm conclusions about how the issue is changing over time. For example, improvements in reporting systems are surely improving the accuracy of current data but they make direct comparisons with previous years' data unreliable. Thus, caution is advised when analyzing trends over longer periods of time.

In 2012, shelter service providers reporting offering shelter on at least one night to nearly 3,400 individuals, a nearly 10% increase over last year and the highest number of persons reported sheltered since 2009, when 3,900 persons received such support. The largest group of shelter service users (42%) were families with children. This group is comprised of 445 families and included 1436 individuals, 881 of whom were children. It increased from 394 families in 2011 (1,282 individuals of whom 803 were children) a rate slightly faster than the total (12% vs. 9.8%). These figures do not include another approximately 30 unaccompanied minors that received shelter, a figure nearly unchanged from last year.

The next largest group of shelter users was single men. They represented 1,362 shelter users, 40% of the total. Single women represented a smaller portion of the total, 549 individuals or 16%. Numbers for these two groups rose about 8% over 2011, a rate slightly slower than the total. Within all of the served individuals the subpopulations can further be identified as 174 with experience in the U.S. military, 7% of the total, and 41 individuals over the age of 62.

As the number of individuals in families taking advantage of shelter services increased, there was also evidence to indicate their episodes of homelessness lengthened. For example, 53% of families served in shelters in 2012 reported being homeless for less than a month and 35% for between one and six months. Last year, 73% of families reported being homeless for less than a month while only 15% reported homeless episodes as long as 6 months. For single men, however, the situation is somewhat mixed. Those served in shelters who reported a homeless episode of less than a month rose from 5% in 2011 to 27%. And the number reporting being homeless between one and six months climbed from 24% to 37%. But the number who reported stretches of homelessness longer than six months dropped from 68% to 30%.

The data provide additional insight into the homeless population. Not surprisingly, the most common reasons reported for seeking shelter are the lack of income to purchase or maintain housing and an inability to find affordable housing. For single women and families, the threat or

fear of violence is another common factor. The homeless face other challenges. Twenty-four percent (24%) of single men, 27% of families and 43% of single women seeking shelter reported issues involving mental health. Substance abuse was a reported issue for 23% of single men, 14% of single women and 5% of families.

There is also evidence to suggest that persons seeking shelter in area shelters have local ties. Two-thirds of all individuals who stayed in shelters reported they had lived in Dane County for longer than a year. Only a few percent reported living here for less than a month.   These numbers reflect a dramatic change from data collected in the 1990's when nearly two-thirds of homeless persons reported living in Dane County for less than a month.

The reported data make clear the imbalance between the need for shelter and local capacity to accommodate that need.   There are currently nine shelter programs, each serving distinct populations – families, single men, persons fleeing domestic violence, etc. The total capacity among reporting providers is about 310 beds, plus 65 seasonal and overflow beds. Few, if any new beds have been added to the system in the past year. There is also some ability to use motel vouchers for short term stays when necessary, though that is a more costly proposition.

Limited shelter capacity has led to rationing. Most shelter programs, for example, are forced to limit the number of days persons may use shelter services. The result is that, on occasion, people may be turned away from shelters for lack of space. In 2012, 1,650 persons were turned away from shelters, most for lack of available space or motel vouchers. While that number is down from 2011, when some 2,000 persons were turned away, its impact is heightened by the fact that nearly two-thirds of those affected were families with children.

The situation involving turn-aways is one area where data reliability is somewhat compromised. An individual turned away from more than one site may be counted twice or, more likely, might be turned away at one location, find shelter at another and be counted as both having received shelter and been turned away. System improvements are expected to help reduce those incidences of duplicate counting. That said, there is little question that the need for emergency shelter is straining local capacity.

Though the growth in capacity in shelter beds has been stagnant, there has been a deliberate effort to invest scarce resources into permanent housing by creating new affordable housing units or helping to make, or keep, existing units affordable through rent subsidies.   There are currently about 1,050 housing units with supportive services that are available to individuals or families who are homeless or in danger of becoming homeless.   Nearly 400 of these units have been added since 2000,

This narrative reports individuals served or turned away from shelter agencies. It does not account for the un-sheltered population - people who do not seek shelter in local shelters but instead sleep outdoors, in vehicles or with friends or relatives in overcrowded apartments. Attempts to count this group are made twice a year (July and January) during a "point-in-time" survey. The point-in-time survey makes a systematic effort to count all homeless individuals (in shelters and non-sheltered) on a chosen day. It is a further attempt to collect and document information regarding the incidence of homelessness in Madison and Dane County for use in shaping and evaluating public policies.