

The Times

Housing first

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It's not a statistic that in spires pride: About 1,600 in Mercer County are without a home.

But it's not that surprising, considering how many households -- 20 percent -- in Mercer earn less than \$25,000 a year. That's about 14,000 in the suburbs and almost 12,000 in Trenton. With that level of income, households don't hold together very well, and it's a very few steps to the street and the huddle of whatever hovel is available.

That could be a tent, a cardboard carton or an alley -- not the most welcoming of quarters.

But, as was reiterated by some inhabitants of those haunts during this week's tally of the homeless, they would rather have that flimsy comfort than the restrictions that go with more substantial structures.

Most programs aimed at housing the chronically homeless -- many of whom are substance abusers or suffer mental illness -- require them to stay sober, take medication or find jobs in return for the hospitality. More than a fair exchange, we might think, but those conditions are nearly impossible for the addled and the addicted to meet.

As part of its outreach efforts, the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, with a blend of state, county and local resources, has adopted a new approach. Housing First will offer the chronically homeless shelter with no strings attached. Already, the Alliance has taken 80 applications.

Before we dismiss it as a bleeding-heart liberal response to symptoms instead of root causes, we might consider the maze of bureaucracies that tangle everyday life. Phone calls, paperwork and a great deal of persistence -- all these are necessary to negotiate progress. Imagine trying to launch that kind of effort from within a flap ping tent as the rain beats down and the damp invades every stitch.

By bringing these people into housing, getting them stabilized, helping them to recognize their problems, guiding them toward the resources that are available instead of ordering them into treatment, there's a much better chance that they will be able to overcome the difficulties they face.

That's what has happened in Denver, where a Housing First program is in effect and the city expects to realize \$3.4 million in savings over two years because of it. A study there found that the homeless people surveyed had run up an average tab of \$43,239 in costs for emergency services in the two years before entering the program. That number dropped to \$11,694 after they were housed.

Similar success has been reported in San Francisco; Columbus, Ohio, and other cities. In fact, national studies show that up to 93 percent of the chronically homeless were stable after two years in the Housing First program, a dramatic increase over traditional programs, which have a 40 percent stability rate.

We commend the efforts of the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, a consortium of leaders from the county's business, government and nonprofit sectors, as it continues to develop new strategies to prevent and end homelessness in Mercer County.