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## ECONOMY

### Homeless shelters face budget cuts, changes in systems

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By the end of the month the verdict will be in: Homeless shelters and transitional housing agencies shocked by cuts will learn whether they can make up at least some of the loss through a different funding source that would push them to rethink how they operate.

About a month ago, shelters including the Aurora House, Family House, Bethany House, the Harbor House and La Posada Family Shelter discovered they might have to do without money they have depended on for decades. The city released community development block grant (CDBG) recommendations and the shelters were not on the list.

Toledo City Council has yet to approve the recommendations.

"We're basically a skeleton crew already," said Kathy Griffin, executive director of Bethany House, a shelter for domestic violence victims. "We don't have a lot of fluff."

Ken Leslie, founder of 1Matters and former Toledo Lucas County Homelessness Board member, said he is puzzled by the decision. The city's citizen review panel and Department of Neighborhoods panel ranked Aurora House's grant proposal the highest in quality and community need of all comparable homeless shelters.

The Bethany House also received a high ranking, along with La Posada. Family Outreach Community United Services (FOCUS), which ranked lower than these agencies, did not get cut from CDBG funding.

Lourdes Santiago, director of the Department of Neighborhoods, said the panel didn't recommend those highly-ranked shelters for CDBG money because they could apply for Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) funding. This is money sent from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that has grown while CDBG funding has shrunk.

Many of these shelters are considered transitional housing projects, meaning that their residents stay for long periods of time and complete rehabilitation processes before their release. The Aurora House, for example, can house a woman and her children for up to two years before that woman is ready to move into a dwelling on her own.

HUD spokesman Brian Sullivan said ESG funding is intended for basic emergency shelter operations, prevention, rapid rehousing and limited transitional housing needs.

#### Rapid Rehousing

The goal is to measure agency success in part by reducing the average length of stay among shelters that use ESG funds. Deborah Conklin, director of the Toledo Lucas County Homelessness Board, said the board aims to achieve a 30-day average system-wide.

The funding shift will change how a lot of shelters do business. For the Family House, the 30-day goal is attainable but not ideal, said Renee Palacios, director of the Family House.

"Essentially, we are turning our shelter inside out," she said.

The change is tasking her shelter to "rapidly rehouse" homeless people who enter the Family House, she

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said. This means that case managers must start planning an exit strategy the second someone walks in for help. Then, they would work with these individuals in their homes, as opposed to on-site, Palacios said.

People stay at the Family House for 38 days on average but the maximum time allowed is 90 days. There are people behind those numbers, Palacios said, and many of them come in with a variety of problems or ailments that must be addressed before they can move out and be successful on their own.

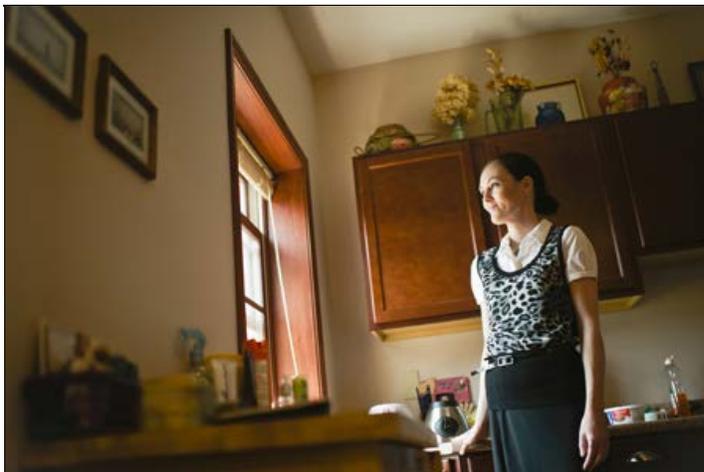
“People don’t come in here and pour out their hearts and souls. They don’t come in saying, ‘Yes, I’m bipolar,’” she said. “It takes weeks to get to know them to see that they’re presenting these issues and they have to accept it and accept the treatment.”

For now, when a homeless person walks through the doors, the staff gives him or her a week to adjust to shelter life before discussing rehabilitative services. Some newcomers might spend two to three days in their rooms crying. This is not the time to be forcing them out into their own apartments, Palacios said.

### Recovery Time

At the Aurora House, which would lose about \$74,390 in the aftermath of CDBG cuts, time could be the difference between healing and relapsing, said Denise Fox, executive director of the house. Many of the women who come in are referred by the court system or by Lucas County Children Services (LCCS). Many are addicted to drugs or alcohol.

The loss has left the Aurora House scrambling to replace 12 percent of its budget with ESG money. The shift will press the Aurora House to reduce the average stay to six months, Fox said.



Karen Fowler

Fox said this is particularly difficult to do because of the collaboration with LCCS and the court, which are not only on their own schedule, but can mandate lengths of time a woman needs to partake in rehab at the shelter.

“If we have a woman with chemical dependency, you aren’t going to get stabilized in six months; you don’t have the capabilities to start thinking clearly and making good decisions until at least six months,” Fox said. “The first year of recovery is very crucial — they are so readily susceptible to relapse.”

Karen Fowler, a 44-year-old mother, spent a few months in the Aurora House before giving up and leaving. She came back later and completed the program in eight months. She said she needed every minute of that period to recover.

She recently graduated with a certificate in Web design from Owens Community College, wielding a portfolio of site designs for a number of local agencies. She has tutored her peers in writing papers, is well versed in English literature and she keeps in tune with her guitar. She and her 11-year-old son Joshua live in a bright apartment in the Vistula district and she’s ready to take off to wherever the job market carries her.

Just six years ago she was on the brink of homelessness. Addicted to alcohol and drifting from one waitressing job to the next, Fowler could hardly turn to her parents in Perrysburg for help. She went to rehab. And then she found the Aurora House.

“I thought I’d be lucky to have a bed,” Fowler said. “But I recovered a sense of myself, a sense of what I can do. Finishing this place was probably the most important thing I’ve ever finished.”

That challenge took nearly a year of structure and authority — she had chores she was required to complete, classes she had to take and a curfew to follow. She had to designate a career goal, find ways to follow through and learn how to balance a checkbook again.

The Bethany House requires a lot of time to serve its residents, Griffin said.

The house is a safehaven for domestic violence victims. The residents stay about eight months on average, but the funding shift will push Bethany House to reduce that number to six, like the Aurora House, Griffin said.

Once a victim is moved out of the shelter, the idea is then to have services brought to them in their new homes. But Griffin said this plan does not take into consideration the fact that many of these victims need a safe hiding place from abusive partners.

Bethany House would lose about \$27,412 of its \$295,580 budget because of the CDBG cuts. In the past, the money has paid for a case manager.

The Harbor House, a transitional home for women with drug addictions, would lose about 5 percent of its budget through CDBG cuts. Women from as far as California come in for rehab services at the Harbor House.

"I'm just going to have to work harder for our fundraisers to make that up and reach out to corporate sponsors," said Executive Director Donna Perras. "It's going to be a burden on the business community absolutely because we're going to be looking for sponsors and that's going to trickle down to them."

### **Embattled money**

The embattled pot of money comes from the federal government, but decisions about how to use it are made locally, Sullivan said.

In 2010, Toledo received \$8.8 million in CDBG money. This year, the city got about \$6.8 million. At the same time, the ESG money increased to \$610,000, compared to \$353,000 a couple of years ago, Sullivan said.

The intent of the ESG boost was not to replace CDBG funding for homeless shelters, he said.

When the housing crisis struck, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act allotted \$1.5 billion to a three-year program called the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program. This money was not for the chronically homeless, but was for those people who were at risk of becoming homeless. Assistance came in the form of short or medium-term rent assistance, financial help with moving expenses or checks to cover security deposits. This helped at least 1.2 million people across the country, Sullivan said.

"The upfront cost of getting into an apartment can make all the difference of somebody falling into homelessness or not," Sullivan said.

When Congress saw that this was working, members voted to allow traditional funding from HUD to be used for prevention and rapid rehousing. So the former Emergency Shelter Grant was changed to the Emergency Solutions Grant, with money added for rapid rehousing and prevention, Sullivan said.

The homelessness board is responsible for setting the parameters for ESG funding. The board will allocate 60 percent for essential services, after administrative fees, and the remainder for housing stabilization programs.

Conklin said an overlooked fact during the ESG funding discussion is that the county now has to operate with less money to prevent homelessness because that \$1.5 billion stimulus program is ending.

The board could allocate less to essential services, but no more than what it already has, she said.

The board had also applied for its own CDBG grant but the panel rejected it, citing a vague objective, undefined community need, no fund balance and incomplete financial information.

"Having residential facilities is very costly to the community," Conklin said. "These are expensive beds at the end of the day. The system will allow us to decipher those who need it the most."

Fox isn't convinced. Her program spends about \$10,000 on each woman.

"I don't know of anyone who can live on \$10,000 a year; that's pretty cost effective for those women," she said.

City council will wait for ESG recommendations before voting on the CDBG recommendations. The council has the final say.

"I'm trying to do everything I can to make sure they have funding," said Councilman George Sarantou. "I

have no interest in turning people with needs out on the street.”

Leslie said the pressure to rapid rehouse in Toledo is misguided.

“They’re all about housing first housing first, but I believe it should be housing next,” Leslie said. “If you kill the shelters, you kill the very people who use those shelters.”

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