

**A PLACE TO CALL HOME:**  
Ottawa County's Ten Year Plan  
to End Homelessness

**2008 PLAN UPDATE**



Original Plan authored by the Ten Year Plan to End  
Homelessness Advisory Board  
October 2006

## 2008 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness created almost two years ago outlined the beginning steps to achieving its vision that **“everyone in Ottawa County has a safe, affordable and permanent place to call home.”** The authors of the plan focused on five strategies designed to realize the vision: to stop families from becoming homeless through the development of a more effective homelessness prevention system, to help people exit homelessness as quickly as possible and to ensure the availability of supports and resources needed to maintain stable housing, assuring that there is an adequate amount of affordable housing available to those in need, encouraging shared responsibility among public, private and governmental agencies, and establishing a method for reviewing and updating the plan.

The Ten Year Plan Steering Committee was created to regularly review the progress of the goals detailed in the original plan, and is pleased to report that there have been a number of key accomplishments over the last two years. In order to **close the front door to homelessness**,

- Ottawa County applied for and was granted enough funding to provide Tenant Based Rental Assistance for up to 10 homeless families with minor children.
- The Ottawa County Re-Entry Task Force was granted funding to provide housing and supportive services to ex-offenders returning to their homes after release from prison or jail.
- Regular landlord forums have been scheduled for various parts of the County designed to inform property owners about prevention services available in Ottawa County and to avert homelessness through preventable evictions.
- The Service Providers Network and the OAHC organized an informational seminar about accessing mainstream resources and encouraged the use of Call-211.

Even with the variety of prevention services available to homeless persons and families, it remains that there are many individuals and families who find themselves without a place to call home. It is believed that what is usually best for those who become homeless is for them to secure permanent housing as soon as reasonably possible. Ottawa County has attempted to **open the back door to homelessness** by:

- Endorsing a countywide Housing First Philosophy which reads:  
*We believe that all persons deserve access to decent, affordable, safe, stable housing, and to the supportive services needed to maintain permanent housing.*  
*The housing services community should prioritize four essential activities:*
  - *providing screening, crisis intervention, and emergency services to individuals and families who are homeless and those at risk of homelessness,*
  - *preventing those at risk of homelessness from losing their housing whenever possible,*
  - *providing interim housing to those who are homeless while assisting them with securing permanent housing as quickly as possible, and*
  - *offering ongoing supportive services focused on maintaining housing stability to individuals and households in need of such services.*
- Securing more than 20 Homeless Assistance Recovery Program (HARP) Vouchers which provide a permanent rental subsidy along with supportive services to homeless families and individuals.

**Building infrastructure** is a key component in the ten year plan and Ottawa County has succeeded in:

- Expanding the Homeless Management Information System in order to gather data regarding homeless persons and those that are precariously housed.
- Continued participation in the Annual Point in Time Count.
- Encouraging the use of the Michigan Housing Locater, a website created by the State of Michigan that maintains up to date listings of available rental housing.
- Supporting the formation of the Ottawa County Housing Commission.
- Creating various Michigan Works! Access Points which provide convenient opportunities for people to search for employment on-line.

While Ottawa County housing service providers are proud of the accomplishments over the last two years, a lot of work remains in order to reach the goal of ending homelessness by 2016. In 2006, the nation was only beginning to understand the implications of a faltering economy. Now it is clear that we are facing a

housing crisis as more and more homes are foreclosed upon and families must seek out other housing alternatives. According to a Grand Rapids press article dated February 20, 2008, eleven years ago there were 57 foreclosures in Ottawa County. In 2007 the number of foreclosures in the county reached 850. The same article stated that Holland Township had the highest number of foreclosures, followed closely by the City of Holland and Georgetown Township. Zeeland Township alone saw an increase of 800% from 2006. Statistics have indicated that there has been a slowing of reported foreclosures over the past few months but that the number is expected to climb again.

Clearly, the best way of determining whether the achievements of the first two years of the plan’s implementation along with initiatives yet to follow is whether the county is experiencing a measurable reduction in the incidence of homelessness. The following data is provided to begin to establish a baseline of homelessness statistics which will be used over the coming years to evaluate the county’s progress toward ending homelessness.

## POINT IN TIME DATA SUMMARY

Ottawa County’s Annual Point in Time Count provided a snapshot of the current homeless population and a comparison to the count conducted in January 2007. In 2008, fifty-six agencies were invited to participate in identifying a count of homeless families and individuals in Ottawa County, and on January 24, twenty-three of those agencies collected data from homeless persons and families. There were two components to the count: an agency count and an unsheltered or “hidden homeless” count. The count of the “hidden homeless” was conducted in the early morning of February 22, 2008 with the assistance of approximately twenty community volunteers.

On January 24, 2008, more than 20 human service agencies throughout Ottawa County provided data regarding two hundred seventy-nine (279) households, or three hundred eighty-eight (388) individuals, found to be either homeless (according to the HUD definition), or at risk of homelessness. Of those 279 households, one hundred forty six (146) qualified as homeless, and one hundred thirty-three (133) were found to be at risk of homelessness. One hundred eighty-nine (189) of those in either category were children (48.7% of the total). On January 25, 2007, there were two hundred eighty-four (283) families, or four hundred twenty-seven (427) individuals, reported as homeless or at risk of homelessness. The above statistics demonstrate a decrease in the Homeless count of nearly 15 percent and an increase in the At Risk count of nearly 19 percent between the 2007 and 2008 counts.

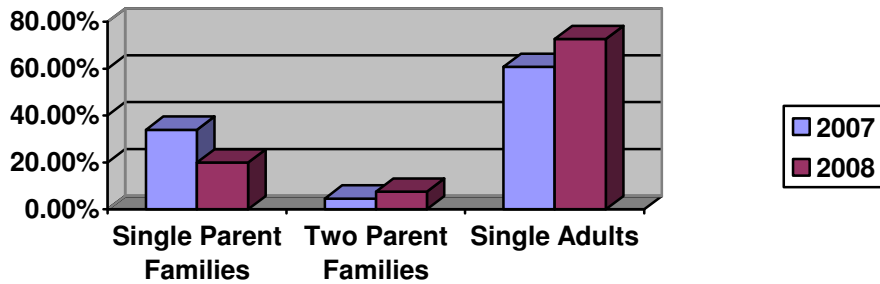
	2007 Point In Time	2008 Point In Time	Percentage Change
Homeless Households (HUD Definition)	171	146	- 14.6 %
At Risk of Homelessness	112	133	+ 18.7 %
Combined	283	279	- 1.4 %

The following sections provide additional statistical breakdowns for the two groups counted – homeless (using the HUD definition), and at risk of homelessness.

### Homeless Households

In January 2008, one hundred forty-six (146) households reported living in an Emergency Shelter, Transitional Housing or facing an eviction within seven days and therefore are considered to be homeless according to the definition of homelessness established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. By comparison, one hundred seventy-one (171) households were found to be homeless in January 2007. The following graph illustrates the family make-up of those households found to be homeless in 2008 compared to those in 2007:

### Make-up of Homeless Families: Ottawa County (2007, 2008)



According to the chart above, the number of homeless single parent families declined by 14% in the last year. On the other hand, the percentage of two parent families and single adults above increased in the past year. Two parent families had a 2.9% increase and single adults experienced an 11.8% increase.

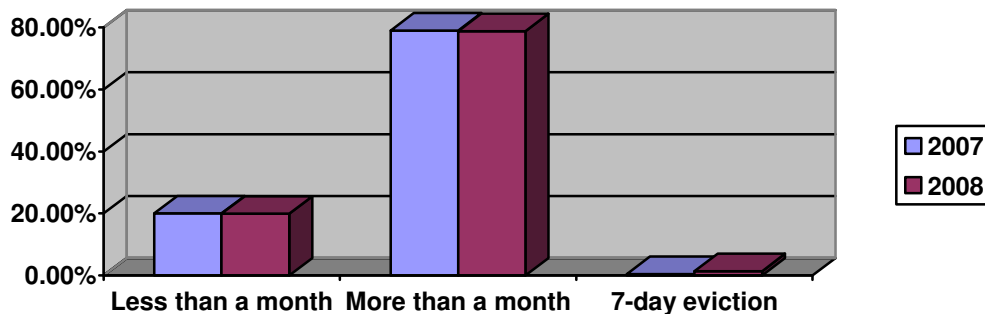
### Extent of Homelessness

The Point in Time Survey gathers data on the length of time spent homeless and number of homeless episodes. Of the 146 households reported as homeless in January 2008:

- 2 households were facing a 7 day eviction and had not other housing options
- 29 had been homeless for less than one month
- One hundred fifteen (115) had been homeless for more than one month
- For those who had been homeless for more than one month, the average length of homelessness was 8 months.

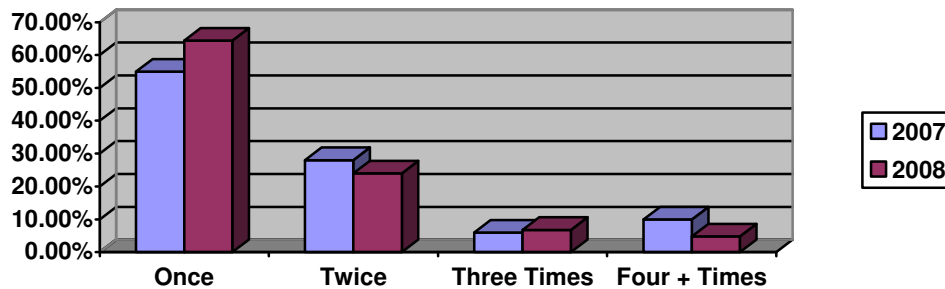
The chart below represents the length of homelessness reported by the Point in Time Survey. A comparison of 2007 and 2008 reflects insignificant differences in the length of time households experience homelessness.

### Length of Time Homeless: Ottawa County (2007, 2008)



The chart below illustrates the frequency of homelessness episodes for the same 146 households and compares the data to last years' reported frequency.

## Number Of Times Homeless: Ottawa County (2007, 2008)



Each year the federal government emphasizes the need to focus assistance efforts on the chronically homeless population. Chronically homeless persons are defined as single adults, with no dependents, who have a disabling condition and who have been homeless for twelve consecutive months or four or more times in the last three years. This year, there were seven people counted who could be considered chronically homeless. Three individuals were found to be chronically homeless in the January 2007 count.

### Homeless Subpopulations

There are a variety of characteristics and disabilities which are common to or are experienced by the homeless population. In January 2008, seventy-one percent of the heads of homeless households (104 of 146) reported one or more of the following subpopulations as applicable to at least one member of their household:

- 47 reported a history of substance abuse
- 14 indicated that at least one household member has a mental illness
- 6 considered him/herself dually-diagnosed with substance abuse and mental illness
- 10 veterans were reported homeless
- 21 had been victims of domestic violence
- 6 homeless women were pregnant on January 24, 2008

### Location of Homeless Households

In 2007, of the one hundred seventy-one (171) homeless households found:

- One hundred forty-four families (144) reported living in the Southwest quadrant of Ottawa County,
- 17 in the Northwest quadrant,
- 4 in the Southeast,
- 3 in the Northeast and
- 2 reported living in another county.

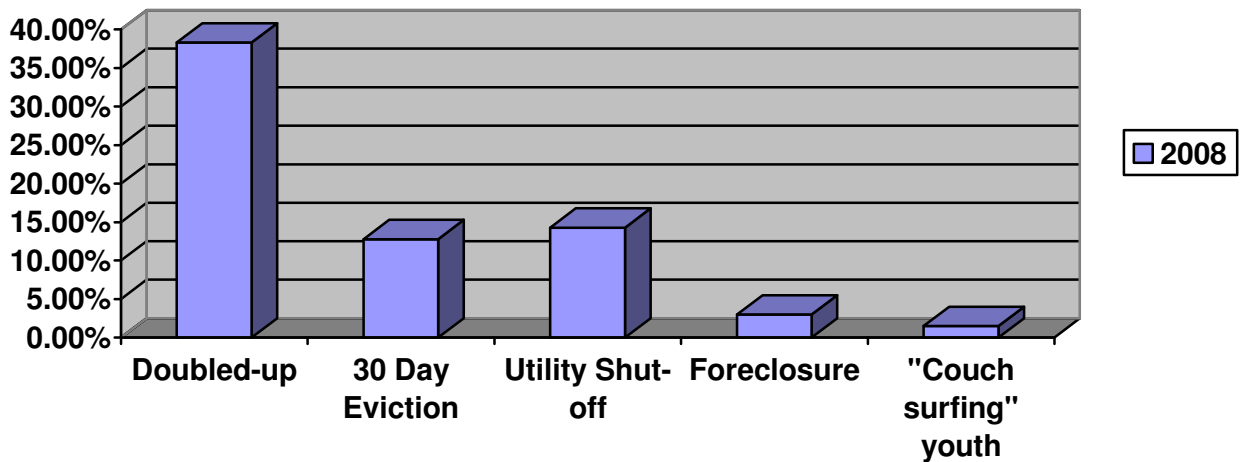
And in 2008, of the one hundred forty-six (146) homeless households:

- One hundred thirty-eight (138) reported living in the Southwest quadrant of the county,
- 4 in the Northwest,
- 1 in the Southeast,
- 2 in the Northeast,
- 2 reported living in another county.

## Households At Risk of Homelessness

The Ottawa County Point in Time survey attempts to count those families and individuals who may be at risk of homelessness. Those at risk of homelessness may be facing a 30 day eviction notice, foreclosure, utility shut-off or may be doubled up with another family or a “couch surfing youth.” On January 24, 2008, of the one hundred thirty-three (133) households at risk of homelessness to being precariously housed:

- 51 reported living doubled up with another family
- 17 were facing a 30 day eviction notice
- 19 had received notice of a utility shut-off
- 4 were facing foreclosure
- 2 reported being “couch surfing” youth.



On January 25, 2007, one hundred twelve (112) families were found to be at risk of homelessness:

- 40 families reported living doubled up with another family,
- 19 families were facing a 30 day eviction notice,
- 15 had received notice of a utility shut-off,
- 6 were facing foreclosure, and
- Area school systems reported that 32 teenagers were homeless, which for purposes of this study could mean that the youth was living with another family other than his/her own family (“couch surfing”), living with a relative, or living in shelter.

With respect to geographic location, in January 2008, of the one hundred thirty-three (133) households at risk of homelessness:

- 76 reported living in the Southwest area of the county,
- 31 in the Northwest,
- 3 in the Southeast,
- 21 in the Northeast,
- 2 reported living in another county.

Of the one hundred twelve (112) households at risk of homelessness in January 2007:

- 36 were found in the Southwest area of the county,
- 44 in the Northwest,
- 16 in the Northeast,
- 15 in the Southeast, and
- One person seeking services lived in another county.

**UPDATED TEN YEAR PLAN STRATEGIES AND ACTION STEPS**

<p>Closing the Front Door into Homelessness</p>	<p><b>Strategy:</b> to reduce the number of families and individuals who become homeless either a) through the provision of prevention services (utility, rent, mortgage assistance) that will allow them to maintain permanent housing, or b) by facilitating direct access to permanent housing upon their discharge from other institutional systems (jails, hospitals, foster care, etc.).</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Action Steps (with progress noted where applicable)</b></p> <p>Homelessness prevention provider agencies and the OAHC will actively pursue new and additional resources to enhance homelessness prevention services. 2007 Progress: Efforts have been made to research and locate sources for additional HP resources but have not been successful to date.</p> <p>The Interagency Services Team will review best practice models in homelessness prevention and develop corresponding recommendations. 2007 Progress: Research into best practice models has been conducted and has been presented to the IST for review.</p> <p>The OAHC will maintain active representation on the Ottawa Co. Re-Entry Task Force, seeking to improve linkages to permanent housing and related services for persons being discharged from local jails and state/regional correctional facilities. 2007 Progress: The OAHC has maintained representation on the OCRTF and member organizations have sought and received funds to assist discharged individuals with securing permanent housing upon release.</p> <p>The OAHC will convene a hospital discharge task force, seeking to improve linkages to permanent housing and related services for persons being discharged from health care facilities. 2007 Progress: OAHC coordinators have reviewed past efforts and best practices from other communities.</p> <p>The OAHC will convene a youth discharge task force, seeking to improve linkages to permanent housing and related services for persons being discharged from health care facilities. 2007 Progress: The Homeless Youth Task Force has agreed to take responsibility for convening a task force to explore the issue of youth discharge.</p> <p>The OAHC will plan and host at least one landlord forum annually to ensure landlords and property management companies are adequately aware of homelessness prevention and mediation services. 2007 Progress: One landlord informational forum was held in July 2007 in Grand Haven.</p>

<p>The OAHC will integrate SOAR services with existing homeless serving and related programs within the community.</p> <p>2007 Progress: Ottawa was one of the first counties in the state to host a SOAR training, with twelve local agency personnel participating in the training; ongoing efforts include planning for inter-agency coordination of the service, and HMIS data entry.</p>
<p>To utilize effective methods of informing those at risk of homelessness of existing primary prevention services (e.g., budget counseling, financial management classes) that may be able to reduce risk.</p> <p>2007 Progress: Best practices have been explored; the IST has considered a number of options and is pursuing a collaborative outreach initiative with the county's 211 service.</p>
<p>The Interagency Services team annually reviews local eligibility guidelines in relation to homelessness prevention grant dollars to best utilize funds in the community.</p> <p>2007 Progress: Prevention providers and 211 staff met in January 2007 to plan for optimal coordination of utility assistance within Ottawa County.</p>
<p>Maintain close linkages with school systems to ensure that key school personnel (social workers, principals) are knowledgeable of available homelessness prevention and related resources.</p> <p>(This is a new action step)</p>
<p>Support the work of the Homeless Youth Task Force in its planning for ensuring availability of needed prevention services designed specifically to families experiencing conflict with youth in the home.</p> <p>(This is a new action step)</p>
<p>Provide comprehensive aftercare and case management services to persons residing in permanent housing programs with the intent of promoting housing retention (ref: HUD obj #2).</p> <p>(This is a new action step)</p>
<p>Ensure continual analysis occurs of gaps in services for specific population groups, such as persons that are doubled-up, persons over-income for HARP or other permanent housing programs, ex-offenders, etc.</p> <p>(This is a new action step)</p>
<p>Ensure availability of foreclosure prevention services to those at risk of or experiencing foreclosure.</p> <p>(This is a new action step)</p>

# Opening the Back Door out of Homelessness

**Strategy:** to help people exit homelessness as quickly as possible and to ensure the availability of supports and resources needed to maintain stable housing.

## Action Steps (with progress noted where applicable)

Educate the OAHC membership, landlords and the community about a Housing First philosophy.

2007 Progress: The OAHC engaged itself in a year-long conversation about how the HF philosophy might best be operationalized in Ottawa Co. The OAHC adopted a HF philosophy statement at its Nov 2007 meeting.

Evaluate existing housing programs and realign, if necessary, with a Housing First philosophy.

2007 Progress: Initial planning has occurred relative to considering model adjustments to existing programs. The Center for Women in Transition, for example, obtained grant funding to explore best practices relative to integrating housing first principles with domestic violence services.

Survey local agencies to determine program capacity for providing case management services; discuss results of the capacity report with OAHC members and create a coordinated plan to ensure adequate availability of case management services to match community need (ref HUD obj #3).

2007 Progress: Discussions among several case management providing agencies have occurred through the IST (ref HUD obj #4).

Pursue new funding opportunities for the creation of new permanent housing units/beds, including additional Homeless Assistance Recover Program (HARP) vouchers (ref: HUD obj #1 and #3).

2007 Progress: a) The Project-Based Voucher development project (a joint project of Heritage Homes, Inc., Community Mental Health and Community Action Agency) witnessed significant progress in 2007. The 45 units all neared completion of construction, and the application process was begun. Twelve of the units are designated for persons/households that are homeless and one or more members are disabled. b) Strong consideration was given by several local agencies to pursuing housing development grants from MSHDA in the fall, 2007, but grants were not pursued due to questions related to capacity and the long-term nature of the projects. c) Ottawa Co. CAA, as the housing agent, and Community Action House, as lead agency, have been in frequent communication with MSHDA regarding the availability of additional HARP vouchers.

Seek funding to increase rapid rehousing options within the community, such as security deposits and first month's rent programs.

2007 Progress: Some research has been conducted but not specific funding sources have been identified for this particular purpose.

Educate shelters and service providers about rapid re-housing opportunities as new initiatives are developed. 2007 Progress: No notable progress was achieved due to absence of new initiatives.
The Interagency Services Team shall continually assess capacity among provider agencies to provide case management services at a level sufficient to meet current and projected demand. (This is a new action step)
Provide/sponsor training to case managers and other service provider personnel pertaining to key, emerging issues, such as case management strategies. (This is a new action step)

<b>Building Infrastructure</b>	<b>Strategy:</b> to encourage the expansion of the supply of decent, affordable, and safe housing, and to advocate for and assist people with securing adequate income to afford housing and other basic necessities.
	<b>Action Steps (with progress noted where applicable)</b>
	Support the continued formation and development of the Ottawa County Housing Commission to become the lead entity exploring housing development needs and concerns in Ottawa County. 2007 Progress: Completed; there is excellent representation of OAHG members on the OCHC.
	Create an advocacy committee to research opportunities to advocate relative to issues that impact financial sustainability. 2007 Progress: The OAHG's Public Relations Committee has assumed responsibility for engaging in advocacy as described in the objective; the committee is discussing ways to engage in needed and effective advocacy.
	Implementation and expansion of the HMIS System; accurate and reliable homelessness data will be readily available to agencies and community constituents (Ref: HUD obj #5). 2007 Progress: All homeless serving agencies are participating and inputting essential / required data elements into the statewide, locally coordinated data management system; reporting tools and mechanisms are being developed on an ongoing basis to improve and enhance the quality of data available to provider agencies and other constituents.
	Promote broad use of the Michigan Housing Locator service as the primary means of maintaining a county-wide list of housing options and availability. 2007 Progress: The OAHG and most homeless provider agencies promote the use of the Michigan Housing Locator among those seeking affordable rental housing in the county.
	Ensure that reasonably current housing market data with a focus on housing affordability and accessibility is available to aid in planning efforts.

2007 Progress: The Ottawa County Housing Assessment, a collaborative project between the City of Grand Haven and Ottawa County is near completion as of February 2008, and will provide a wealth of reliable housing data to planners and agencies.

Link with the Michigan Works! Agency (MWA) to identify job training opportunities and employment services for the homeless and precariously housed; case management providers maintain close partnership with Michigan Works! Agency to ensure availability of employment services to homeless and at risk individuals and families (ref: HUD obj #4).

2007 Progress: A liaison to MWA attends OAHC meetings and ensures adequate linkage; a formal presentation on MWA services was made to the OAHC in August 2007.

Promote homeownership as an option for eligible persons currently receiving homelessness services by maintaining cooperative agreements and relationships with agencies and organizations providing affordable homeownership services.

(This is a new action step)

## Community Involvement

**Strategy:** to seek support for and involvement in the plan from across the larger community, including engaging elected leaders, community members, consumers and service providers.

### Action Steps (with progress noted where applicable)

Communicate the Ten-Year Plan and related initiatives to community leaders, elected officials, interested individuals and organizations and consumers.

2007 Progress: a) OAHC representatives made presentations to various groups, including at a League of Women Voters event, Holland Chamber of Commerce Early-Bird Breakfast, Holland Assoc of Senior Professionals; b) TYP information has been incorporated into the OAHC website and is also included on the Ottawa County website (CAA page); c) an electronic newsletter template has been developed

Request opportunities to present Ten-Year Plan and other OAHC updates to the Ottawa County Human Services Coordinating Council (HSCC) semi-annually/annually, as appropriate.

2007 Progress: presentations to the HSCC have been made on two occasions in 2007. Interest has been expressed on behalf of the HSCC for routine presentations on OAHC activities and developments.

**Other Notable Progress:** a) held OAHC planning forum, facilitated by MSHDA consultant, November 2007; b) approved set-aside funds for use as stipends to compensate consumers who attend coalition/committee meetings; c) held Mainstream Resources Forum, June 2007; d) Ottawa Co. CAA received a grant to fund 7-8 tenant-based rental assistance vouchers.

**The following consumer account provides an example of how the county service community serving homeless persons is capable of assisting families to move along the continuum of services to achieve housing stability and permanency:**

Susana: Consumer of Continuum of Care Services

Four years ago Susana was living a life controlled by drug addiction. She had lost everything that provided stability in her life, including stable housing and the custody of her children. At this stage in her life, Susana could not envision what life could be like with the things most people take for granted -- income that meets her basic needs and decent, stable housing.

Susana voluntarily entered a substance abuse recovery program with OAR. After successfully completing the 3 month program, with no other housing options available to her, she sought housing at the Holland Rescue Mission. Susana felt like she had hit rock bottom and she felt ready to make some significant changes in her life. Her case manager at the Rescue Mission helped her seek longer term housing opportunities that included supportive services. Susana applied for housing through the Community Housing Partnership, a two year transitional housing program. By clearly articulating why the CHP program could help her reach her long term goals of sobriety, creating a stable home for her children, full time employment, and eventually homeownership, she was accepted into the program. She recognized the importance of accountability and structure in order to move toward her goals. She envisioned learning a new way to live and receiving reinforcement and encouragement for making positive changes.

OAR, the Holland Rescue Mission and the Community Housing Partnership were only a few steps along Susan's road to recovery. She took advantage of opportunities in the context of these programs to make sure that she would reach her goals. While still living in the Rescue Mission, Susana started seeing a therapist at Community Mental Health and continued her regular appointments while in transitional housing. Susana was working part time and making ends meet on an income of only \$400 a month. After a year of therapy, she began an organized search for a full time job. She quickly found a job that she loved and immediately began to make plans for the next steps on her journey – bringing her children home and owning her own home. With a full time job and stable, affordable housing, she soon gained full custody of her three children. Only a few months later Susana was accepted into the IDA (Individual Development Accounts) program through Neighbor's Plus, which seeks to help participants make long term financial goals and plan for debt repayment. Susana completed the requirements of the IDA program, after which she applied to Habitat for Humanity and was selected to be a "homeowner partner."

But that wasn't the end of the opportunities available to Susana through the Continuum of Care. Ottawa County Community Action Agency, through its partnership with the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), offered a new housing assistance program for the homeless. The Homeless Assistance Recovery Program (HARP) is designed to provide a permanent housing subsidy to those experiencing homelessness. Susana needed affordable housing for an interim period following the end of the transitional housing program until her Habitat home was completed. When Susana completed the two year transitional housing program, she moved into an affordable apartment with the help of a monthly rental subsidy and began work on her Habitat home.

After a little more than a year since leaving transitional housing, Susana and her children dedicated their new Habitat-constructed home. With a lot of perseverance and hard work, and with the help of a continuum of housing services, Susana has achieved her goals and is living the life she could not have envisioned only a few years before.