

# Meeting the Challenge of Homelessness

by Erika D. Peterman



Homeless residents are often referred to as “the invisible population,” but the impact of homelessness on communities is anything but intangible. Florida has the nation’s third largest homeless population according to the state Council on Homelessness, and Florida experienced a 14.8 percent increase in homelessness between 2007 and 2012 – a period during which homelessness *decreased* 5.7 percent nationally.

“On one day and one night in January 2013, local (Florida) communities counted 45,364 persons who were living on the street, or in an emergency shelter,” the council stated in its 2013 report.

The face of homelessness may not be what you’d expect. The nation’s fastest-growing homeless population is families with children, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. That also holds true in Florida. When the **City of Gainesville** embarked upon its 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, it found that “a significant portion of the population was comprised of families, women and children,” said Communications Manager **Robert Woods**.

**Robert Marbut**, a consultant who has worked on homeless issues for more than three decades and advises municipalities, said the biggest change in homeless population trends has been “the dramatic increase in the number of homeless combat veterans, mostly from the Marine Corps and Army Infantry 11 Bravos,” he said. “In many parts of the country, nearly a third of all homeless individuals are combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders.”

Marbut also noted that Florida and California have seen significant increases in the number of homeless families led by single mothers, due to higher housing costs at a time of stagnant wages.

## IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

While it is impossible to measure the human suffering wrought by homelessness, the strain it places on city budgets and services is clearer. The push by communities to stop panhandling and get homeless people off of the streets has a direct impact on law enforcement and jail costs, said **Tom Pierce**, executive director of the Florida Department of Children and Families’ Office of Homelessness. “Significant” numbers of jail beds are occupied by homeless residents who often end up being repeat offenders because “they have no other option but the street.”

Indigent care is another major area of cost. In a 2009 piece for *Quality Cities* magazine, **Philip F. Mangano**, then-executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, estimated the cost of emergency room visits for just 20 homeless people a day would add up to \$7 million in a year.

According to the Shimberg Center for Housing Studies’ “2013 Rental Market Study: Needs of Homeless Families and Individuals,”

**there are 42,476 homeless individuals and 31,148**

**homeless families with children in Florida.** This does not include 6,798 unaccompanied homeless youths working to stay in school and 24,815 families with children in school who live in unstable housing, such as motels or with friends, neighbors and relatives.



“Again, what you’ve got is a tremendous cost in the emergency rooms that the community is going to bear,” Pierce said.

Marbut said municipalities face two big challenges in dealing with homelessness. First is a lack of political will to change the way they deal with the issue. And then there is the fear of NIMBY (not in my backyard) backlash from the communities. He said the conservative right tends to want to criminalize homelessness while the liberal left leans toward failing to proactively engage those living in city parks, beaches and under bridges.

“Neither of these extremes will successfully help homeless individuals graduate from the

street,” Marbut said. “The only way to reduce homelessness is to proactively engage homeless individuals to go into 24/7 programming services. Whether you’re sitting in jail or in a park, you’re not off the street.”

Statewide, two other challenges faced by both cities and counties are the cost of homelessness and lack of funding.

“The problem doesn’t stick to one political set of boundaries (city limits, for example) and intergovernmental cooperation is also difficult when the subject is so serious,” said **Lynn Tipton**, executive director of the Florida City and County Management Association. “Counties are required by the state to bear indigent care costs; however, cities are often the first line of response for homelessness (especially in urban and suburban areas) and can sometimes make the response a doubled cost as both governments get involved.”

While no homelessness bill has been filed to date, **Casey Cook**, a legislative advocate with the Florida League of Cities, expects the Legislature to take up the issue during the 2014 legislative session, including providing more funding and a more organized approach to address homelessness.

## INTERVENTION AND INNOVATION

Eight years after adopting its 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, the City of Gainesville recently took a big step forward by taking ownership of a location for a one-stop service center to provide its homeless residents with a full range of services: shelter, meals, clothes-washing facilities, social service assessments, counseling, health and medical services, job training and more.

The center will be housed at the closed Gainesville Correctional Institution and is expected to begin providing phased services as early as February.

“All of these services would involve service delivery designed to empower the homeless members of our community with the tools and support needed to re-enter society as productive,



In many parts of the country, **nearly one-third of all homeless individuals are combat veterans** suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. **Source:** Consultant Robert Marbut

functional citizens and taxpayers,” said Woods. “From the inception of this plan until now, the community has labored to provide these services in a number of venues and through a number of differing agencies.”

Recent community surveys indicate that Gainesville’s homeless community fluctuates between 1,200 and 1,500 people. “Many were unaware of services within the community that were available to them, and as a result, were sleeping in places that included wooded areas and vehicles,” Woods said.

Gainesville’s outreach efforts include emergency rent dollars to prevent families from becoming homeless; support for the InterFaith initiative, which helps local religious institutions provide temporary shelter for families for up to two months; and its Homebound program, which seeks to reconnect the homeless

with their families or service providers in other communities that agree to accept responsibility for service provision. The city coordinates with the Alachua County Veteran Affairs Office to provide shelter for local veterans, and its Emergency Cold Weather Shelter Program offers the homeless a place to stay when the temperature dips below 40 degrees.

Marbut served as a consultant to the **City of Clearwater**, which he named as one of the state’s most innovative municipalities in terms of dealing with homelessness. He said the city’s consistent approach has resulted in a drastic reduction in street-level homelessness. One of Clearwater’s strategies is to provide extensive training for public employees who regularly encounter homeless residents, including lifeguards, park workers and librarians – not just EMS and public safety personnel. Marbut noted that librarians



### FLORIDA’S HOMELESS POPULATION

Under 18 – <b>17.8 percent</b>	Over 60 – <b>5.7 percent</b>
18-24 – <b>8.2 percent</b>	Men – <b>67 percent</b>
24-60 – <b>68.3 percent</b>	Women – <b>33 percent</b>

For the 2011-2012 school year, Florida’s public schools identified **63,685 students as homeless**.

**7,107** more Floridians experienced homelessness in 2012 than in 2007, a 14.8 percent increase.

#### CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

1. Employment/Financial – **49 percent**
2. Medical/Disability – **14.9 percent**
3. Housing/Forced to Relocate – **14.1 percent**
4. Family problems – **11.7 percent**

— 2013 data collected upon entry to Florida’s shelters  
**Source:** Florida Council on Homelessness 2013 Report, available at [www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/homelessness/docs/2013CouncilReport.pdf](http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/homelessness/docs/2013CouncilReport.pdf)



are almost always overlooked in local governments' efforts to fight homelessness, even though homeless residents often take shelter in libraries during bad weather or go there to bathe and sleep.

The city "trained more people across the board than any city I've ever (consulted)," he said. "It's paid off in amazing ways."

Clearwater also has been proactive in dealing with homeless encampments in wooded areas by not allowing them to grow out of control. But inhabitants aren't simply notified and removed, which would only result in homeless residents setting up encampments in other locations. Social workers often accompany the police officers and public works officers who go into encampments, and they encourage those living there to take advantage of local programs to assist them. The message isn't just "get out" but "we're here to help."

"That's the big difference," said Marbut. "When you send in a case worker, that really has a tremendous return on outcomes as opposed to just saying, 'No, no, no you can't do this, and by the way, your stuff is going to get shipped off four days from now. It's not humane and it doesn't work.'"

Most recently, Marbut worked with the **City of Sarasota** and **Sarasota County** to form a plan aimed at reducing visible street homelessness and relieving the burden on the jails, criminal court system and emergency rooms. The result was a 55-page report/action plan with a host of recommendations, including the following:

- » Moving from a culture of "enablement" to a culture of engagement: "Free food handouts and cash from panhandling – although well intended by nice folks – actually perpetuates and increases homelessness through enablement. Rather, street handouts, food and cash donations should be redirected to high-performing agencies."
- » Establishing emergency intake portals for families with children in order to provide intake, stabilization, emergency housing, master case management and referral services.
- » Creating a "Men's and Women's Public Safety Triage and Stabilization Unit," which would be the main intake portal for adult homeless citizens, with the Sarasota Sheriff's Office as the lead coordinating agency. "All adult services county-wide should 'spoke off' of this main hub."
- » Increasing the number of longer-term housing placements for men, women, families with children, and unaccompanied minors. "To be successful, there needs to be an increase in inventory capacity as well as improvements in service programs to better prepare individuals and families for the challenges they will face."

However cities tackle the problem, experts agree that it is essential to engage their community partners instead of going it alone. And as Marbut advised the City of Sarasota: Just get started.

"Let's get everybody to the table and figure out a coordinated approach so we can, in fact, have a multi-pronged strategy that addresses housing people can afford, jobs so that they can sustain their own living and the support network of services to keep everybody who is on the street safe until they can get back on their feet," Pierce said.

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## BY THE NUMBERS

The **City of Clearwater** was able to **reduce street-level homelessness by 81 percent in the first six months** of its efforts to combat homelessness. Over time, it has realized a sustained 86 percent reduction of street-level homelessness.

**Source:** Consultant Robert Marbut

Florida has **15,503** transitional housing and permanent supportive housing beds for individuals and **4,124** transitional and supportive housing units for family households.

**Source:** Shimberg Center for Housing Studies

The four states with the largest percentages of the total national enrollment of homeless students during the 2011-2012 school year were:

California – **21.3 percent**

New York – **8.3 percent**

Texas – **8.1 percent**

Florida – **5.4 percent**

**Source:** National Center for Homeless Education Data Collection Summary (October 2013)