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ALERT TOP STORY

Brisben Center fears funding challenges

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Leadership at the Thurman Brisben Center, a residential emergency homeless shelter in Fredericksburg, fear a reduction in local funding.

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Leadership at the Thurman Brisben Center, a residential emergency homeless shelter in Fredericksburg, fear a reduction in local funding due to pending changes in how funding applications will be reviewed and the center's resistance to

embracing a “Housing First” approach to ending homelessness.

Agencies such as the Brisben Center, Micah Ecumenical Ministries, Loisann’s Hope House and Empowerhouse apply for funding from the five jurisdictions in Planning District 16—Fredericksburg and the counties of Stafford, Spotsylvania, Caroline and King George—each fiscal year through a unified portal hosted by Stafford.

This year, a committee established by the regional Continuum of Care—a federally mandated planning body made up of about 60 area organizations that coordinates housing and services for the homeless—will review agency applications for jurisdictional funding.

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The panel will provide additional information to the localities about how each agency fits into the CoC’s plan, said Samantha Shoukas, housing and community health program director for the George Washington Regional Commission.

This additional level of review is being implemented at the request of several local county administrators, Shoukas said.

“Since the pandemic, there have been more requests for funding, and staff needed help sorting through them,” she said.

Spotsylvania County Administrator Ed Petrovitch told the Board of Supervisors at its Oct. 11 meeting that staff “really had no way of knowing what the other localities were planning on donating” to partner agencies.

“We had no criteria for how much to donate,” he said. “So the thought is that by going through the CoC to get a recommendation, based on their formulas, each of the localities would have an idea of what other localities were being recommended to fund and we would have some accountability for how our local funds were going to be spent.”

The committee that will review applications for jurisdictional funding this year will include representatives from each locality as well as the CoC funding and performance committee, which includes the Community Foundation, the Fredericksburg Department of Social Services, the Rappahannock United Way and a local realtor from Chrismarr Realty.

Though Shoukas said local governments will still make the ultimate decision about where their funding goes, the Brisben Center fears the extra review will result in reduced funding from the localities, which amounts to 20% of the agency’s budget, which is \$1.3 million per year.

The remaining 80% of the budget is funded by donations from individuals, businesses, private foundations and faith and civic organizations.

“If this board of supervisors decided to have funding run through the CoC, then essentially, the Brisben Center will be defunded,” executive director David Cooper told Spotsylvania supervisors.

Housing First

The Brisben Center’s concern is that the CoC—which applies for and distributes federal and state funding for homeless services—plans to apply federal and state policies that prioritize the “Housing First” model.

Housing First is a philosophy in which the goal is to get those experiencing homelessness into independent housing as quickly as possible.

Since the early 2000s, both the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development have shifted funding to agencies that support Housing First and away from traditional shelters.

Prior to Housing First, Shoukas said, the focus was on preparing those experiencing homelessness to be “housing ready.”

People would be given shelter and services, such as treatment for mental health conditions or drug addiction, job coaching and classes in financial literacy and healthy parenting, and then be offered housing.

That is the model the Brisben Center employs in its mission to “provide temporary shelter and equip residents for employability to resolve poverty and obtain housing.”

Housing First flips that model.

“The philosophy is that everyone is ready for housing—it is a universal right,” Shoukas said. “With Housing First, you put people in housing first and then wrap services around them.”

Participation in the offered services is not required, but even so, Shoukas said, 92% of people who go through the CoC’s programs do not return to homelessness. Those programs include rapid rehousing, which provides short-term rental assistance and services, and permanent supportive housing, which combines housing assistance with support services to meet the needs of the chronically homeless.

Advocates of Housing First say it costs taxpayers less because participants are less likely to use expensive emergency services, such as shelters, hospitals and jails.

But the Brisben Center’s mission and goals prevent it from aligning with the Housing First model, center administrators say.

“We have a different approach, it’s homegrown and it has worked,” said Chris Payton, resource development officer for the Brisben Center. “We are teaching people to fish.”

The Brisben Center, which has been open for 34 years, accepts families and single adults and requires residents to be sober, receive treatment for mental health conditions and participate in job coaching and other programs.

Agencies that align with the Housing First model and receive HUD and Virginia DHCD funds must be “low barrier,” meaning sobriety and a lack of criminal background is not required for entry.

Brisben Center leadership say doing away with those requirements for entry poses safety concerns for resident families, staff and neighbors.

“We recognize there is a need [for low-barrier shelter], but not here with children,” Brisben Center board member David Gazzetta said.

Gazzetta said the center’s mission is to serve “the vast majority of the homeless [who] have the ability to become independent.”

Brisben Center leaders point to the fact that people who identify as “chronically homeless”—those with disabilities who have been continuously homeless for a year or more, either consecutively or in separate episodes in the last three years, as defined by HUD—make up a minority of the area’s homeless population.

The annual HUD-required Point in Time count of the area homeless population, conducted Jan. 22, identified 60 people—or 28% of the homeless population—who met the definition of being chronically homeless.

The Brisben Center has been successful in helping the rest of the homeless population out of homelessness, leaders say.

“We are trying to help the people that we can,” Payton said.

Between 2015 and 2019, the Brisben Center sheltered 58% of the area homeless population, Gazzetta said.

According to Cooper's presentation to Spotsylvania supervisors Oct. 11, the center sheltered an average of 578 people per year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adults who stay at Brisben and participate in its programs exit the shelter having increased their average monthly income by 80%, their average wage income by 167% and their connection to physical health, mental health and substance abuse services by 92%, according to the presentation.

Shoukas said that while the chronically homeless population is in the minority, it is the population most likely to be unsheltered and therefore more visible.

"The issue becomes when people are seen outside," she said. "Those people are the most vulnerable and the ones who are not able to get into Brisben. Our concern is the unsheltered, [because] those who are the most vulnerable and the most in need of services are also the people the community is less likely to serve."

A level playing field

Several local jurisdictions have reduced funding for the Brisben Center in recent years. Spotsylvania cut its contribution for fiscal year 2023 from \$86,520 to \$50,000, a 42% decrease.

Stafford cut its funding for the center from \$112,171 to \$107,170 for fiscal 2022 and provided \$109,849 for the current fiscal year.

Fredericksburg's funding has remained level at \$80,000 per fiscal year since at least 2020.

Shoukas said that no one on staff with the GWRC or the CoC will review the jurisdictional applications for new fiscal year funding. The review committee will use a scoring system that is still being developed, but will consider the agency's "regional impact, community need and whether the budget is appropriate."

"Housing First is a small portion," she said.

Shoukas said no one is asking for money to be moved “away from shelter and to housing.”

“It’s not one or the other. There is a need for both,” she said. “I think what Brisben does is wonderful and there is a place in our community for that.”

Cooper also said the Brisben Center doesn’t want to “put funding for housing at risk.”

But he said the Brisben Center has not been able to find “traction or support” for their shelter model with the CoC in recent years. The center—along with 12 other area organizations that did not comply with new bylaws established by the CoC board this year—is no longer a member of the CoC as of this month.

According to the new bylaws, an organization can be removed from membership if it has not participated in any CoC meetings in the past year or responded to a request for contact updates.

The Brisben Center is also not part of a memorandum of understanding that was signed in April by area homeless services providers. The MOU outlines each agency’s role in the HUD-required coordinated entry process, which is meant to “help communities prioritize assistance based on vulnerability and severity of service needs to ensure that people who need assistance the most can receive it in a timely manner,” according to a HUD policy brief.

Payton said the Brisben Center “had some objections to coordinated assessment.” He said people were being referred to the Brisben Center that the center could not admit because of its own intake requirements.

Leaders worry the Brisben Center is being sidelined.

“We are just asking for a level playing field,” Payton said.

Shoukas reiterated that despite the additional review of agency applications for jurisdictional funding, local governments will still make the final decision.

“In the end, it’s up to the jurisdictions to decide how to make sure that local dollars have the most impact,” she said.

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