

Homeless search for affordable housing

BY ERIC DINKINS

The city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County continue to reduce the number of homeless people in the county, but the price of housing is making it difficult for families and individuals with low incomes to stay off the streets.

The number of homeless individuals in Mecklenburg County has dropped 40 percent since 2009, but the number of homeless families – which is defined as at least one child and one adult by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – has increased by 57 percent during this time, according to a report released Oct. 29 by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Coalition for Housing (CMCH).

The report, “Forward Movement: Ending and Preventing Homelessness in Charlotte-Mecklenburg,” details the progress of the city and county’s collaborative “Ten-Year Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness” that was developed in 2006. The CMCH was created in 2010 to advise the City Council and Board of County Commissioners on implementing strategies as part of this effort, and includes 15 members who all have experience in sectors of the housing industry.

The total number of homeless individuals in Charlotte-Mecklenburg was

figured at 2,014 in January, and 820 people in 280 families were homeless, according to the report.

But this number represents a small portion of those who could be considered homeless because it does not include what CMCH Chairman Ken Szymanski referred to as “invisible homeless,” or “couch homeless.”

Szymanski, who is also executive director of the Greater Charlotte Apartment Association, said a lot of people who don’t have a place of residency will live with friends and family, and the fact that they’re not living at a shelter or on the streets does not mean they’re not homeless.

“We know the couch homeless is probably tens of thousands, and we know that the definition makes all the difference,” he said. “It’s kind of unpredictable how many of those couch homeless will become street homeless.”

Szymanski said many in this group of homeless are unable to pay rents on their low incomes. He said that although people aim to spend 30 percent of their income on housing, those living on low incomes have no choice but to pay about 50 percent of their income on housing.

The Charlotte Housing Authority considers an income of \$25,700 for a two-person family in Mecklenburg County to be “very low,” and an income

“BECAUSE THERE’S A WAITING LIST, THESE 5,000 VOUCHERS ARE SPOKEN FOR. IT’S NOT LIKE THEY’RE AVAILABLE FOR USE.”

Ken Szymanski
CMCH chairman

of \$15,730 for the same size family to be “extremely low.”

According to the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, the median rent across the county is \$740 per month, which would be close to \$8,880 a year and account for 35 percent of a “very low” income. This same rental rate would account for about 56 percent of an income considered to be “extremely low.”

Considering that only 10.8 percent of county households cost less than \$500 a month to live in, those with low incomes don’t have a lot of affordable options to choose from. The bulk of county renters, or 67.3 percent, pays between \$500 and \$1,000 dollars a month.

The city and the county’s effort to accommodate homeless people is focused on aiding those who are struggling to find affordable housing by working

alongside the housing authority and the 40 homeless-service providers across the community.

But Zenica Chatman, corporate communications officer at the Charlotte Housing Authority, said federal and local housing aid hasn’t been able to keep up with the cost of residential rates.

For the first time in seven years, the Charlotte Housing Authority opened its waiting list for the housing choice voucher program, which assists up to 5,000 families pay for private residences – including single-family and town houses and apartments.

Szymanski pointed out the differences between current recipients of the vouchers and those on the waiting list.

“Because there’s a waiting list, these 5,000 vouchers are spoken for. It’s not like they’re available for use,” he said.

The waiting list began accepting preliminary applicants on Sept. 22, and the housing authority received about 32,000 applications. Eligibility for the voucher program is based on annual income and criminal history, to name a couple.

The housing authority has yet to pull applicants from the waiting list, but only 12,000 applications were submitted the last time the waiting list opened in 2007.

ERIC DINKINS can be reached at (704) 814-1344, eric.dinkins@mecktimes.com