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## **The New Homeless Reduction Task Force of NWF will make Positive Impact on Community**

**PENSACOLA, Fla. (March 4, 2021)** - A community partnership in Northwest Florida is being formed to better streamline services to homeless individuals and families with the ultimate goal of offering essential resources in helping them achieve a life God intended for all citizens in our two-county area. **The Homeless Reduction Task Force of NWF** will increase public safety and strengthen the Northwest Florida community by reducing the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

This Task Force will be co-chaired by John Johnson Executive Director of **Opening Doors NWFL**, the Lead Agency for Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties Local Continuum of Care and Connie Bookman the Founder & CEO of **Pathways For Change**.

*“Our community is finally coming to grips with the devastating effects of our tolerating men, women and children, sleeping in our neighborhood woods and on our downtown sidewalks.” Johnson said. “Private citizens, government, faith based, health and social organizations along with business leaders are all coming together with the formation our new Homeless Reduction Task Force.”*

The 2020 Point in Time (PIT) homeless census in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties revealed an increase in the unsheltered homeless. The goals of the task force are to achieve the following in the two counties in 2021:

- 15% increase in shelter capacity for families and women
- 15% increase in funding to providers of homeless services
- 15% increase in utilization of mental health and treatment services
- 15% increase in follow up case management services to newly housed
- 20% increase in Permanent Affordable Housing beds (50 additional)
- 15% reduction in “homeless hot zones”
- 10% reduction in E.R visits by the homeless populations
- 10% reduction in court interaction by homeless persons

## **PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE'S ROLE**

In 2004, Pathways For Change (PFC) coordinated with the First Judicial Circuit to facilitate an 18-month mental health and addictions treatment program for individuals caught in the court system due to their destructive substance use. In 2012, PFC enhanced their vision, focusing on prevention, education, workforce development, counseling, family support, veteran and reintegration services at a one stop shop called, The Family Center. In 2014, PFC opened a sober living environment called the Clinton Cox Residence for graduates of their addictions program. In 2017, PFC moved that focus toward treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and housing for homeless female veterans in a partnership with the Veterans Administration. In addition to programs at the three PFC facilities, Bookman supervised a clinical social work and psychology intern program, giving graduate interns hands on experience in counseling, teaching of life skill classes and mentoring clients.

2021 - PFC is currently pivoting from daily program operations to a broader vision, partnering with Opening Doors and assisting local agencies who are in the business of eliminating homelessness and panhandling in Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties. Bookman will work directly with homeless service providers to create a cross section of operating and cooperative Memorandum's of Understanding. Such agreements bridge communication gaps and streamlines the referral processes of each organization to another Continuum of Care member. Bookman is also scheduled to host a weekly podcast, inviting providers to highlight their mission, services and successes along with interviews and insights into our individuals and families coming out of homelessness in the two county area.

Bookman and PFC's Research Specialist & Court Liaison, Brittany Austin, M.S., will manage the Opening Doors grants software and provide funding identification and grant writing services to each Task Force nonprofit leader.

PFC will also assist current Opening Doors staff in the coordination and implementation of the HMIS (homeless management information system), utilizing undergraduate social work and criminal justice interns. HMIS is an online data base containing information on those who are homeless in our community. HMIS can create a plan to eliminate their causes of homelessness, providing an assigned caseworker and tracking metrics which chart the combined activities and efforts occurring to eliminate a person's state of homelessness. Interns, supervised by PFC licensed staff, will be placed in facilities most frequented by our local homeless population such as health care facilities and helping organizations, inputting the unique needs of a homeless person and documenting past and present services that were provided for each individual. By employing trained case management workers, the HMIS data base is then used to prioritize referrals of the homeless to task force service providers. A seamless system of care will result in bridging individuals and families from a state of homelessness back into affordable housing, nutritious eating, regular mental health and medical care and reliable door to door transportation on their road to self-sufficiency.

## **STRATEGIES**

Opening Doors will continue hosting the monthly Continuum of Care meetings of local service providers, government representatives, and businesses. The monthly meetings will spotlight

the task-force progress. Bookman and Johnson will develop and appoint seven subcommittees to inventory existing services and gaps in local services that the task force members can bridge. These subcommittees will each meet once a month, bringing ideas and insights to the entire task force leadership for discussion and action.

### **SUBCOMMITTEES:**

Subcommittees will be co-chaired by two local professional leaders with expertise in the below services who will conduct the monthly meetings and focus on:

**Housing**

**Health Care**

**Mental Health, Addiction and Case Management**

**Faith Based Organizations/Food Programs/Transportation/Mentorship**

**Employment/Workforce Development/Education**

**Legal Services/Criminal Justice/Specialty Courts**

**At-Large**

We will be documenting successes to create a framework that is scalable, measurable and can be implemented by other communities.

### **MEASUREMENTS OF SUCCESS**

Key Performance Indicators will be developed and focus on the reduction of current and prevention of new homeless in the two county area; the transition of homeless individuals out of the woods and off downtown sidewalks into affordable housing and employment. This will involve tracking outcomes for the following:

- homeless populations (students, families, individuals)
- homeless in court system
- homeless sub-populations (mental illness, addiction, medical)
- homeless families (number of children)
- homeless hospital discharges
- homeless hot zones
- number of homeless enrolled in permanent housing
- number of homeless obtaining employment
- homeless follow up (intervals of 6 months and 1 year) after initially moving into indoor housing from living outdoors.

*“Nearly fifteen hundred individuals and four thousand children are homeless on any given day in Escambia County and Santa Rosa County. The Task Force will provide a platform for all service providers to create memorandums of understanding, offering a seamless referral system*

*and increase the likelihood that our homeless will receive what they need to be healthy and productive citizens in our Northwest Florida communities.”*

The CoC Opening Doors meetings are the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of every month from 1pm – 2pm via Zoom. The public is welcome.

Each Subcommittee will meet at the locations and dates provided by their co-chairs.

To learn more information, please contact:

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