

A plan to end homelessness

Waterbury creates 10-year strategy to help those in need

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WATERBURY — Two years ago, Harold Rollins found himself out of prison and out on the street, a recovering drug addict with no family, no job and no where to go.

A police officer referred Rollins to the St. Vincent dePaul Mission homeless shelter on Benedict Street.

That is where Rollins started the long journey back to what he calls “a normal life.”

With a place to live and the medical care he needs, Rollins is now able to give back, and help others like himself. That is why he joined community leaders to craft a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Waterbury.

The beginnings of this plan, which was unveiled Tuesday at the Chase Municipal Building, establishes long-term goals in four major areas — housing, services, employment and supportive services.

With United Way of Greater Waterbury leading the way, Waterbury will be the 12th city in Connecticut, and the last of its big cities, to craft a local, data-driven 10-year plan to eradicate homelessness.

Although the city already has a number of grants to help the homeless, and prevent others from losing their shelter, creators of the plan admit they will need a significant infusion of funds to make these goals a reality. Some of the dozens of specific goals listed in the plan include:

- Create 250 permanent supportive living units for homeless;
- Provide short-term financial assistance to those at risk of becoming homeless;
- Create short-term a health care respite center for homeless;
- Extend bus service hours to increase access to night jobs.

Rollins ticks off the way that each of these issues can stall a homeless person’s return to “a normal life,” and how the programs that address such issues have helped him and the hundreds of others like him in Waterbury.

At the shelter, Rollins met mental health clinician Anthony J. Boccie Jr., the Waterbury Hospital caseworker whom Rollins calls his guardian angel. Boccie helped Rollins find housing and health care.

It took Rollins eight months to get out of the shelter and into a place of his own on Robbins Street. With help from New Opportunities Inc., Rollins pays about \$70 a month for his apartment.

“Having a real place to live is everything,” Rollins said. “What kind of a job can you get living in a shelter? How can you take care of your health if you’re walking the street all day with no place to go?”

Rollins said a short-term medical respite center for those discharged from institutional care with no where to go might have prevented him from becoming homeless in the first place.

After his release from prison, where he was doing time for robbery, Rollins lived in a city half-way house and a sober house. But a torn rotator cuff cost him a job and he quickly found himself unable to pay his rent.

A place to recover from his shoulder injury might have kept Rollins off the street and in touch with medical workers who could have showed him how to manage his diabetes before they had to amputate his toes. Now Rollins and his guardian angel, Boccie, say he's "in a good place."