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\$3.6 MILLION GRANT TO HELP HOMELESS VETERANS, OTHERS WITH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DISORDERS OBTAIN PERMANENT HOUSING

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS) has received a three year, \$3.6 million federal grant to help homeless veterans and chronically homeless non-veterans with behavioral health issues find and maintain permanent, safe housing.

The initiative, referred to as H³Ok (Homes, Honor and Health for Oklahomans), will focus on the chronically homeless in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. The intent is to provide stable living conditions and basic needs so individuals with mental illness and addiction are better able to benefit from treatment or other interventions that address the underlying cause of their being homeless in the first place.

“There are still far too many people living on the streets, chronically homeless, in Oklahoma,” said ODMHSAS Commissioner Terri White. “Some of these individuals are there because of untreated mental illness or substance abuse disorders. Unfortunately, budget cuts and reduced access to mental health services have contributed to this problem.”

According to White, approximately half of people who are homeless have mental health issues – about 25 percent of them serious – and many experience problems related to substance abuse. An estimated 33 percent of all homeless males are veterans. The Oklahoma City VA Medical Center recently indicated that roughly 20 percent of the homeless veterans they see served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“We can absolutely make a difference with these populations,” said White. “The H³Ok project will take a ‘housing first’ approach, because if these people don’t have a stable place to live, they will continue to wander the streets and never get the help they really need.”

ODMHSAS will work with the Oklahoma City Housing Authority and the Indian Nations Council of Governments which, in turn, will create local H³Ok hubs to be managed by the Homeless Alliance of Oklahoma City and the Tulsa Community Service Council’s “A Way Home for Tulsa.” Case management services will be provided by Hope Community Services in Oklahoma City and Mental Health Association Oklahoma in Tulsa.

Each of these organizations has a proven history of successfully implementing services to reduce homelessness and “we are very fortunate to be working with them,” said White.

The “housing first” approach is a proven way to address the needs of chronically homeless populations. Administrative functions will be in place by Oct. 1, with service delivery beginning in early January 2015. Grant funding is provided by the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

An estimated 360 people are expected to receive services through the program over a three-year period.

“The fact that we have received a federal grant to make this possible is a great thing, but it is also a smart investment to avoid much more costly consequences later,” said White.

Participants will receive assistance for such things as housing, therapeutic counseling, access to health care, employment opportunities and a chance to restart their lives. White said the homeless housing program marks a major step forward in creating a stronger state-level infrastructure and renewed vision shared by the Governor’s Interagency Council on Homelessness.

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