Home to Stay:

Helping Families Avoid or Recover from Homelessness in Maine's Rural Areas

Study Commissioned by:
MaineHousing
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1. Executive Summary

Rural homelessness is less visible than its urban counterpart. In rural areas homelessness is so hidden that many people express surprise that it exists at all. Yet it is a harsh reality for too many families. In rural areas people who are homeless may live in very substandard housing on roads off the beaten track, in campgrounds, or in their cars. Often they "couch surf", meaning that they have no permanent address but move from the home of one relative to a friend's house, sleeping on couches or floors until they must move on to the next person who will take them in for a while. Without access to shelters, and with many people living away from town centers, it is easy to see why people who are homeless simply disappear into the landscape.

In order to learn more about rural homelessness MaineHousing contracted with ABG Consulting to convene focus groups of shelter and service providers in seven of Maine's rural counties. These focus groups were held in early January 2009, in Rumford, Farmington, Dover-Foxcroft, Machias, Presque Isle, Ellsworth, and Alfred. Participants discussed a range of topics including homelessness prevention, resources available to assist families who are homeless, obstacles to helping families transition to housing stability, assessment, and recommendations for improvement.

In 2008 rural homeless shelters assisted over 1,200 individuals, many of whom were in family groupings. But many families who lack a permanent place to stay never make it to homeless shelters, so they are not counted among the families who are homeless. They also cannot access housing and services that are available to those who meet the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness (residing in a homeless shelter, in a place unfit for human habitation, or in transitional housing for persons who are homeless who originally came from the street or an emergency shelter).

Homeless shelters in Maine serve as the primary portal through which people who are homeless can access housing and services. While the shelter system itself is under-resourced, families who can get to a shelter have a greater likelihood of being connected to assistance that can help them regain housing stability. Outside the shelters, the barriers to housing stability are much greater. Like a traffic circle whose exits are blocked, families can get stuck in a frustrating cycle of trying to access services whose rules are confusing, and where there is sometimes no clear authority to which they can appeal for direction.

Identified barriers to housing stability, and recommendations for overcoming them, include the following:

Preventing Homelessness

- Families wait until the last minute to ask for help, limiting the opportunities for preventing homelessness.
  Recommendation: create a statewide "Don't Wait Too Late" ad campaign to reach out to families living on the edge. The campaign would encourage families to seek help before their circumstances became dire, and direct them where to go for assistance.

- Homelessness can be prevented through judicious use of small amounts of money to prevent loss of housing, allow families to remain with friends or relatives until they can get on their feet, or help families quickly transition to a new unit.
  Recommendation: establish a flexible fund in each rural county that can be used to fund critical gaps that can prevent homelessness or help families obtain housing.
- Both providers and families themselves are often unclear about resources that exist to help them prevent or resolve homelessness.
  Recommendation: Create and fund a single point of contact within rural counties, especially those without general shelters, to prevent homelessness, and to support families who become homeless transition to housing stability. This position could oversee use of the flexible funds described in the first bullet.
- While General Assistance (GA) is clearly intended to be a resource for families facing homelessness, there are many barriers to accessing this.
  Recommendation: Work with the GA system to improve access to these funds for preventing and resolving family homelessness.
- Planning and resource development should be driven by data. In several of the rural counties there is insufficient data on the numbers of families who are at risk of becoming homeless or who are actually homeless, and what resources they need in order to return to housing stability.
  Recommendation: support data collection efforts in rural counties, such as those in Franklin and Washington Counties, to improve knowledge about the numbers of families needing assistance.
- Confusion exists about what resources exist to assist families who are homeless, and where they should go for help.
  Recommendation: Support rural housing and services providers in articulating the continuum of care that exists within their counties or regions to assist families facing homelessness. This information can then be fed to the 2-1-1 system and the single point of contact.

Moving from Homelessness to Stable Housing

- Rural service providers report a shortage of affordable housing on the private market that is of good quality.
  Recommendation: improve the availability of affordable housing construction and rehabilitation in rural towns, particularly where jobs and services are concentrated.
- Landlords frequently do not want to rent to Section 8 voucher holders.
  Recommendation: recruit and educate landlords about the Section 8 program and housing quality standards, and provide support when families' behavior threatens their tenancy.
- The Section 8 voucher system in rural areas is confusing to both providers and families.
  Recommendation: create a more seamless system for helping people who are homeless access available vouchers and use them to live near jobs and services.

- Families without a permanent address often lack access to a phone where they can make calls or a voice mailbox where they can receive messages.
  Recommendation: work with telephone companies to provide voice mailboxes or provide phone access for families for time limited periods in order to expedite communication with landlords and employers.
- It is very difficult for families who do not have a permanent address to manage the paperwork associated with applying for housing from a number of different sources.
  Recommendation: develop an online common application, not unlike the colleges that use a common application form, to facilitate the application process for housing.
- Some rural providers noted that it is difficult for families to keep track of what programs or resources they have applied for, when they applied, and the current status of these applications.
  Recommendation: research the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of issuing "smart cards" to families that can save this information electronically.
- Strategic use of technology can reduce costly duplication of effort (such as first completing an application on hard copy and then entering data into a computer).
  Recommendation: invest in training, and in updated hardware and software, to help rural providers use their scarce time more efficiently.
- Rural providers are often hampered in their ability to assist families facing homelessness because they lack the time to plan and coordinate care with other providers, and they wear so many hats it is difficult for them to stay on top of changes in available resources.
  Recommendation: use technology to increase opportunities for rural providers to participate in mainstream resources trainings or other planning and information sharing sessions.
- Rural providers note anecdotally that they are seeing an increase in teen parents and young families, in roughly the 16-24 year old range, who lack skills needed to live independently.
  Recommendation: create additional transitional housing opportunities, or create staffing that can provide supports to young families to help them learn skills that will prevent future homelessness.
- HUD's definition of homelessness does not work well in rural areas.
  Recommendation: work to create new resources such as the flexible fund and the single point of contact, and to better integrate available programs and resources to improve their accessibility to families who do not meet HUD's homeless definition.

2. Introduction/Overview

Rural homelessness is less visible than its urban counterpart. In a city, you may see people dressed in layers of clothes sitting on a bench or in a doorway, or pushing a shopping cart piled with belongings down the sidewalk, and recognize that they are homeless. There are shelters where people who are homeless can find a safe place to sleep and get access to needed services.

In rural areas homelessness is so hidden that many people express surprise that it exists at all. Yet it is a harsh reality for too many families. In rural areas people who are homeless may live in very substandard housing on roads off the beaten track, in campgrounds, or in their cars. Often they "couch surf", meaning that they have no permanent address but move from the home of one

relative to a friend's house, sleeping on couches or floors until they are told to move on to the next person who will take them in for a while. Two of the counties highlighted in this study have no physical shelter of any kind; thus, people who are homeless and have no other housing options must leave their home area for shelters in other parts of the state. Washington County has a shelter for victims of domestic violence, and one at Pleasant Point for the Passamaquoddy, but no general shelter for families who are homeless due to other reasons. Without access to shelters, and with many people living away from town centers, it is easy to see why people who are homeless simply disappear into the landscape.

For many years Maine's planning for assisting people who are homeless has been driven by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which employs a definition of homelessness with a built-in urban bias. HUD limits homelessness to mean people living on the streets, in shelters, or in places unfit for human habitation. It excludes people who are couch surfing.

This poses a particular dilemma for families who are homeless in rural areas where no shelter exists. Because they have children families are much less likely to be living on the streets or in their cars. Doing so would put the children at risk, and also draw the attention of child welfare officials who might remove the children from parental custody. So families are more likely to stay for short periods with friends or relatives, or in hotels. They are thus not counted as families who are homeless, and not eligible for housing and services dedicated to helping people who are homeless achieve housing stability. Even when they do meet HUD's criteria, because they are living in a car or in a campground, documenting homelessness can add burden to staff already stretched very thin trying to administer a range of other programming.

This study was undertaken to gain a better understanding of families who are homeless in rural areas of Maine, the housing and services currently available to them, and the most critical gaps in assistance. The information gathered will support better planning and resource development for these families and the providers who struggle to piece together the resources to assist them.

MaineHousing contracted with Anne Gass, ABG Consulting, to visit shelters and providers in seven rural counties of the state: Aroostook, Franklin, Hancock, Oxford, Piscataquis, Washington, and York.

With the exception of York, and perhaps Hancock, these are some of the poorer and least populated counties in Maine, as shown in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: County Data

	Population	Families Below Poverty Level	Persons per Square Mile
Aroostook	72,176	11.50%	11
Franklin	29,840	9.10%	18
Hancock	53,208	5.30%	34
Oxford	56,486	11.50%	27
Piscataquis	17,235	11.20%	4
Washington	32,801	15.50%	13
York	201,075	5.60%	203
Maine	**1,315,398**	**8.6%**	**43**

All data from 2005-07 American Community Survey except for Piscataquis County, which uses 2000 Census.

Focus groups were held in mid-January 2009, in Rumford, Farmington, Dover-Foxcroft, Machias, Presque Isle, Ellsworth, and Alfred. Participants discussed a range of topics including homelessness prevention, resources available to assist families who are homeless, obstacles to helping families transition to housing stability, assessment, and recommendations for improvement. Gass visited shelters and also interviewed several families who were experiencing homelessness. This report and its recommendations are drawn from these discussions. The focus group participants are listed in Appendix 1. The shelter resources that are available in each of the counties are discussed in the following sections.

3. Caring for Families who are Homeless in Rural Areas

A. Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless

Families may get by for months or years living check to check; only avoiding a major car repair, illness, or brief job lay-off keeps them from losing their homes. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that many wait until the last minute to ask for help. After all, for an extended period they have been able to pull together the resources to make it through another month. Still, providers note that preventing homelessness is much more difficult when families wait until a Friday afternoon at 3PM to start looking for help. Had they called when they got their eviction notice or lost their job there would have been more time to help them think through options and develop a plan.

Shelters are intended to serve as housing of last resort, and most families view them that way. If there are other options, including living with friends or family, or even camping out in good weather, most will use those as long as they can. Staying in a familiar area allows them to

maintain ties with natural support systems, and keep children in school with friends and routines that add important structure to their lives. Only when these other options are exhausted do families turn to shelters. An exception to this is families who are fleeing from domestic violence, who may prefer the safety of a shelter even if it means moving out of the area. In general, though, families are fearful of shelters and try to survive on their own as long as possible.

When they have exhausted other housing options families must turn to shelters. If there is no shelter nearby, or the shelter is full, they will have to travel to one that has room for them. MaineHousing has capitalized a Winter Emergency Response Fund that is administered through shelters (or through other nonprofits if no shelter exists). Total funds available are $55,000 for the winter of 2008-09; families can qualify for up to $500 of assistance. Funds can be used flexibly to ensure that families are able to avoid unsheltered homelessness during the cold winter months when shelter beds are not available. In warmer months families unable to access a homeless shelter, and who have exhausted the help of family or friends, may have to sleep in their car or in a campground until they get into a shelter.

Figure 2, below, illustrates where families facing homelessness turn to for help, and where they are referred to. There are roughly 14 categories; some categories, such as churches, other nonprofits, or family and friends, may have several options.

Figure 2: Families who are Homeless or at-Risk Ask for Help from, and are Referred to, These Resources

	Out-reach	Family/ Friends	2-1-1	Police	GA	DHHS	Case Worker	United Way	Churches	Schools/ Head-start	Shelters	CAPs	Other Non-profits	MDs
Aroostook		X	X		X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Franklin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Hancock		X	X		X				X	X	X	X	X	
Oxford		X			X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Piscataquis		X	X		X				X	X		X	X	
Washington		X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	
York	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X

Most of the rural counties lack an organized, structured way for families at risk of or experiencing homelessness to ask for help. There are some exceptions to this. In York County, York County Community Action (YCCA) has an outreach component that fields calls from families who are facing homelessness and helps connect them to resources. York County Shelters has also built a strong identity through events, outreach, and newsletters and is widely known as a place to turn to for help in preventing homelessness. The domestic violence (DV) programs that exist in nearly every county do considerable marketing and outreach to women who may be in abusive relationships. Even if the abused woman herself does not know of the DV program, chances are her friend, family member, or other helping professional does.

In Franklin County a youth outreach worker from New Beginnings and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Intensive Case Manager function as the resource and referral network for families who are homeless, which includes being available after hours for emergency calls. They have access to a limited supply of funds that can be used to put people in a motel for a couple of nights, or help with a rent deposit. In general, though, unless people are clients of the mental health system, or are victims of domestic violence, there is no clear path to assistance when they face a loss of housing.

As a result, there appears to be considerable duplication of effort on the part of the family and helping professionals in calling around to locate assistance. In the course of looking for help they may call 2-1-1, GA offices, several churches, DHHS, Head Start programs, and community action programs in order to piece together the package that will support their housing for a little longer, or help them get to a shelter. In contrast to urban areas of the state, where shelters effectively serve as portals to housing and services, in rural areas the path to preventing homelessness or recovering from it is much less clear. Families may call GA for help only to be directed to call a church, who might direct them to 2-1-1 or a community action program or some other resource, who might in turn direct them back to a church or to GA. In the process it becomes difficult to track the assistance families have applied for and received, so time is wasted calling to ask for assistance they have already accessed or for which they are no longer eligible.

In addition to adding to families' anxiety about their immediate future this experience is an inefficient use of yet another resource which is scarce in rural areas – staff time. In rural areas, without access to corporate and municipal funding streams available to urban centers, and with a lower volume of clients, nonprofit workers must be generalists who wear many different hats and are responsible for multiple programs. While they have wide ranging knowledge, it is harder for them to develop depth of expertise in specific areas. It is challenging to serve clients in multiple programs, attend planning meetings, do resource development, recruit and supervise volunteers, and complete required reporting. In larger organizations these functions might be specialized and parceled out to individual staff people, but in smaller rural organizations a few staff must do it all.

B. Reasons for Homelessness in Rural Areas

Families in rural parts of the state become homeless for the same reasons they do in urban areas: divorce, domestic violence, family conflict, job loss, physical health issues, mental illness, substance abuse, and a lack of affordable housing. Several providers mentioned that substance abuse, particularly of prescription medications such as Oxycontin, is on the increase throughout most areas of Maine.

Complicating factors include the lack of jobs, especially those that are full-time and provide benefits. In most areas of the state entry level or low skill jobs are part-time, pay the minimum wage, and offer no benefits. One job alone would not be sufficient to support a family, and even two jobs at minimum wage might fall short. Higher paying, full-time jobs with benefits do exist, but they require post-high school training or advanced degrees. Because many parents who are homeless have a high school diploma, GED, or less, they are not in a position to seek these higher paying jobs. Job training resources are scarce, and the presence of small children makes it difficult to both work to support the family and attend school or training to improve their skills.

Transportation to get to jobs is also a problem, as is finding affordable housing in the towns where jobs are located. In fact, for many families, the challenge of lining up a steady job that is located near affordable housing is nearly insurmountable. As Figure 3 illustrates, Maine Department of Labor (DOL) online job listings for the month of January 2009 show very few jobs available in each county, and even fewer that would be suitable for low skilled workers. The unemployment rate in December 2008 was higher in all Maine counties than at any other point in that year. While the online listings may not capture all available jobs, the immediate outlook for job hunters in Maine's rural counties looks grim.

Figure 3: Maine DOL Online Job Listings/Unemployment Rate

	# Jobs Jan. '09	# Low-skilled/ entry level	% low skilled	Unemployment Rate (Dec. 2008)
Aroostook	87	17	20%	8.2%
Piscataquis	1	0	0%	12.0%
Franklin	19	3	16%	8.5%
Washington	27	0	0%	9.4%
Hancock	11	1	9%	9.4%
Oxford	24	8	33%	9.2%
York	115	25	22%	6.3%

Maine Dept. of Labor
http://www.state.me.us/labor/lmis/

Finally, providers report a shortage of affordable housing that meets housing quality standards. Maine's rural areas often boast amenities that attract vacation or second home buyers; this is particularly true along the coast, or near lakes or mountains. This drives up the cost of housing for year-round residents, who may only be able to afford aging, substandard trailers or uninsulated camps. In coastal areas such as Hancock County families sometimes take advantage of seasonal rentals from roughly November through April. While rents may be relatively cheap during the winter months, these houses are often poorly insulated summer homes and expensive to heat. And when spring comes they must vacate the housing and find another place to live.

C. Assisting Families who are Homeless in Rural Areas

When families lose their housing and staying with relatives or friends is no longer an option, they turn to a shelter for assistance. Most often this is done with great reluctance; the people who are homeless interviewed for this report all reported being fearful of shelters and using that resource as a last resort. It is hard to accept help from strangers, and they were worried that other shelter guests would represent a threat to the safety of their children.

First they have to find a shelter. As Figure 4 shows, there is no shelter of any sort in Franklin County. Washington County has a DV shelter, but the general shelter in Perry is operated by the Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy to serve Native Americans (it receives no McKinney-Vento

funding). Piscataquis County only offers safe homes for victims of domestic violence. Safe homes offer short term (2-3 night) stays in private homes scattered around Dover-Foxcroft. They are intended to provide a safe respite for women (including those with children) while they consider their next steps. Depending on the situation, this may be to return to the abusive partner, moving into an apartment or to the home of friends or family, or on to a DV shelter in another county.

Figure 4: Shelters that Accept Families

	Family or General Shelters	Domestic Violence
Aroostook	2	4
Franklin	-	-
Hancock	3	2
Oxford	3	-
Piscataquis	-	1
Washington	1	1
York	1	1

Note: In Hancock one of the DV programs is safe homes. In Piscataquis, the DV program is safe homes only; there is no central shelter.

Getting to a shelter can be a problem for families who are without access to reliable transportation. They may get rides from friends or family members, or from the sheriff's department, though often officers will only take them as far as the county line. If they have a car but no money for gas they may be able to get a gas card from a church or some other source. DV staff may sometimes give women and children rides to other shelters if the beds in their own shelter are full, or if they think the family needs to be farther away for safety reasons.

The map on the following page shows the locations of the family shelters in the seven counties that were the focus of this survey. Three of the counties with the highest percentage of families below the poverty line; Washington, Franklin, and Piscataquis, have the fewest shelter resources. When the nearest shelter is 50-100 miles away, staying on someone's couch may seem to be a better option even if going to the shelter is the route to getting housing and income supports that will help families become stable.

Once they are at a shelter, families meet with shelter staff to complete an intake and a needs assessment, and begin work immediately on developing a plan for housing stability. The assessment tools are described further in Section 4.

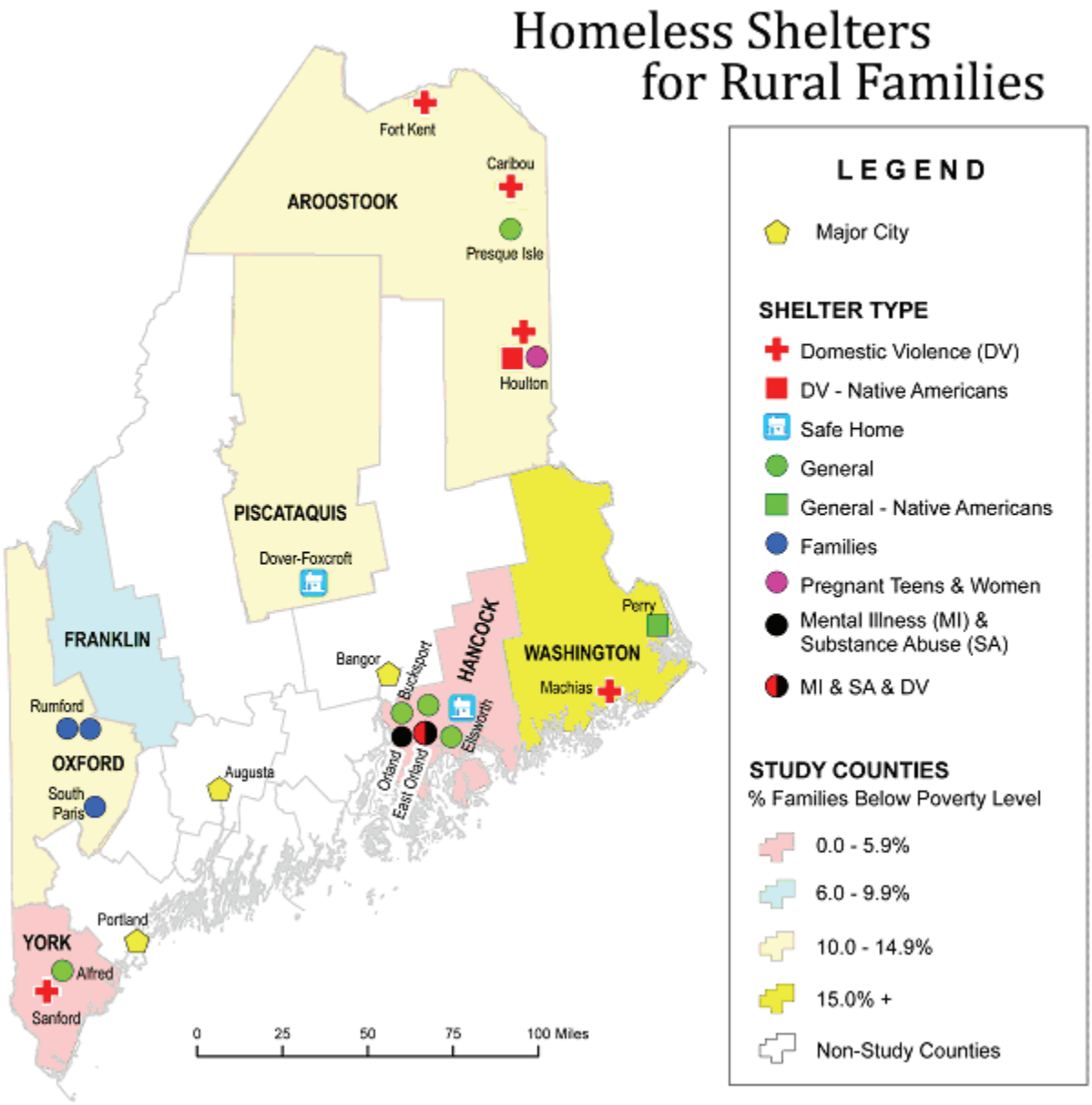
The intake process varies but typically takes about two hours and requires reviewing and signing as many as nine forms. These forms include shelter rules, consent forms, and applications for assistance. Some families find this process difficult, especially if their literacy level is low. The forms are not written at an 8th grade English level and can be confusing to read and understand.

Sometimes families are denied entry to a shelter. Reasons for this include the following:

- The shelter is full, including any overflow beds.
- The background check reveals a criminal history, especially a history of violence or assaultive behavior against women and children.

- Active substance abuse[1], especially if guests refuse to abstain while staying at the shelter or to participate in recovery activities.
- Mental illness where symptoms are pronounced and would be disruptive to other guests.

Figure 5



[1] For example, the Emmaus Shelter in Ellsworth requires adults to take a breathalyzer test, and will not permit entry until the results are within limits.

Families who are homeless most frequently are helped to apply for the following resources:

1. **Subsidized Housing**
    - Section 8 vouchers
    - Public Housing (through local housing authorities)
    - Subsidized housing (Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), Rural Development, Mod Rehab)
    - Shelter Plus Care
    - Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP)
    - Rental Assistance Coupon Plus (RAC+)
    - Transitional Housing

    Shelter staff may also drive shelter guests to look at units or to apply for assistance, or provide a gas card to other shelter residents who have a car so they can provide transportation.

2. **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)**
3. **Food Stamps**
4. **MaineCare**
5. **General Assistance**
6. **Employment Assistance**
    - Transport to Career Center
    - Access to a computer and the internet to facilitate job hunting and applications
7. **Head Start**
8. **Legal Assistance/Court Advocacy**

    For victims of domestic violence only.
9. **Other Assistance**

    Shelter staff may also call around to churches or other programs to find resources that a family needs, such as funds to fix a car that is needed to commute to work or school, legal assistance, help with medications, or a gas card. With the help of churches and local businesses some shelters are able to provide help with rental or security deposits to help families secure apartments.

    If school age children are present staff will also advocate with school systems to provide transportation so that children can continue attending their original school. While school systems are federally mandated to provide this assistance it is an unfunded mandate so they are often reluctant to do so, particularly in the current economic climate.

The goal is to help people who are homeless transition to housing stability as quickly as possible. Shelter staff encourages families to take responsibility for making this transition happen. While rules vary slightly from shelter to shelter, families are generally required to:

- Participate in chores at the shelter once or twice a day, from cooking to cleaning to sorting donations or snow shoveling.
- Look for housing (some shelters have them keep a log of landlords called or units visited).
- Look for employment, or to continue working if they already have a job.
- Participate in activities to maintain sobriety (e.g., counseling, AA, etc.).
- Take their medication as prescribed (usually medications are held centrally by shelter staff during the stay).
- Make calls to churches or other sources of assistance for things like security or rent deposits, gas cards, or other critical expenses.

All shelters have kitchens or meal programs on-site. Some also offer food pantries and clothes closets where families can obtain clothing they lack.

D. Counting Families who are Homeless

Estimating the number of families who are homeless in rural counties is difficult for a number of reasons, including:

- There is no shared agreement among town GA administrators, police, and service providers as to the definition of homelessness. Some may be unaware of the HUD homeless definition, or may not appreciate its gatekeeping function in determining eligibility for housing and other services. Thus, the term homelessness encompasses a wide range of scenarios.
- While GA administrators, police, and service providers may come in contact with families who are homeless, they are not usually required by their funding sources to maintain data on homelessness so they do not track these data.

Two counties are taking steps to address the issue of counting people who are homeless. Franklin County, through the Franklin County Homeless Coalition, has made a concerted effort to engage local police and sheriff's departments, GA administrators, and other service providers to track homeless numbers. From mid 2007 to mid 2008 this documentation effort identified 144 households who lacked permanent housing; these included couch surfers as well as those who would have met the HUD homeless definition. The 144 households included partners and children, so at least another 100 people were actually homeless. Reasons for homelessness most often were inability to afford rent and lack of work, as well as family conflict. While ages were not recorded for all of those who needed assistance, at least 30 (21%) were 18 or younger, and the vast majority were under 25 years. Most had been living with friends or relatives until those resources were exhausted.

Using a similar approach, the Washington County One Community subcommittee on homelessness plans to collect data during 2009 on individuals and families who are homeless.

They are asking GA administrators, food pantries, school counselors, and sheriff's departments to assist with this data collection effort. This will help build awareness of homelessness as an issue and obtain better data to support future planning efforts. It would be helpful to repeat this process in other rural counties as well in order to obtain better estimates on homelessness.

Figure 6, below, shows the shelter occupancy in the target counties in 2008. In family shelters occupancy rates are skewed by the fact that the shelters are congregate, rather than barrack style, and some effort is made to assign one family per room. It may end up that a family of two is assigned a room with four beds, which means the room is full but two beds are unoccupied. This makes it appear that occupancy rates are low even when all the rooms at the shelter are full. Nevertheless, the general shelters, in particular, manage to have high occupancy rates.

In calendar year 2008 over 1,200 people in rural Maine stayed at a homeless shelter. Length of stays ranged from three weeks to six months. Factors affecting length of stay include the availability of affordable housing locally, the wait time for a housing voucher, and the time needed to put together all the resources the family will need to remain stable in housing once they move out of the shelter. Figure 6, below, captures unduplicated clients and bed nights but does not include the many other families who stayed with friends and relatives because they did not have a permanent residence.

Figure 6

Provider	Facility	Beds	2008 Total Clients*	2008 Total Bed Nights	2008 Average Stays (bed nights)	2008 Occupancy Rate
Community Concepts, Inc.	Oxford Hills Family Shelter	9	26	2,152	83	65%
Community Concepts, Inc.	Strathglass Shelter	9	62	2,728	44	83%
HOME, Inc.	Emmaus House	22	118	6,983	59	87%
HOME, Inc.	Hospitality House	12	11	1,455	132	33%
HOME, Inc.	St. Francis Community	9	14	2,646	189	80%
HOME, Inc.	St. Francis Inn	9	56	3,064	55	93%
Homeless Services of Aroostook	Sister Mary O'Donnell	30	196	4,754	24	43%
Rumford Group Home	Norway Homeless Shelter**	12	25	721	29	66%
Rumford Group Home	Strafford Ave. Family Center	5	24	1,048	44	57%
York County Shelter	York County Shelter	53	338	13,099	39	68%
Battered Women's Project	Caribou	12	61	2,165	35	50%
Battered Women's Project	Houlton	14	47	1,677	36	33%
Battered Women's Project	St. John Valley	8	24	1,108	46	38%
Caring Unlimited	York County	18	134	4,507	34	70%
Next Step	Machias	12	67	1,383	21	32%

* Total Clients includes all individuals who stayed at the shelter (even if they were part of a family group) and is an unduplicated count
**Opened in October 2008

4. Shelter Provider Assessment Tools

Assessment at shelters begins when families present for assistance, either over the phone or in person. An immediate purpose of the assessment is to determine families' eligibility for shelter services, and appropriateness for housing at the shelter (for instance, in most cases they must not be actively using substances).

Shelter assessment practices vary according to the type of shelter and the population served. At DV shelters safety of the woman, staff, and other guests is paramount, so they will ask questions about the abusive partner, whether a protection order is in place, and whether there is imminent threat of violence. General shelters will not cover these topics in the same detail.

Other categories of questions include:

- Psychiatric history (these questions are asked in most detail at York County Shelters which has clinical staff onsite and is licensed by DHHS as a mental health facility)
- Substance abuse history
- Employment history
- Military status
- Housing history
- Corrections history and status
- Factors precipitating this episode of homelessness

Shelters do not use uniform assessment tools; they are developed and amended on an ongoing basis by each facility to meet its own unique needs. Because of this, adopting a common intake and assessment tool would be a challenging process.

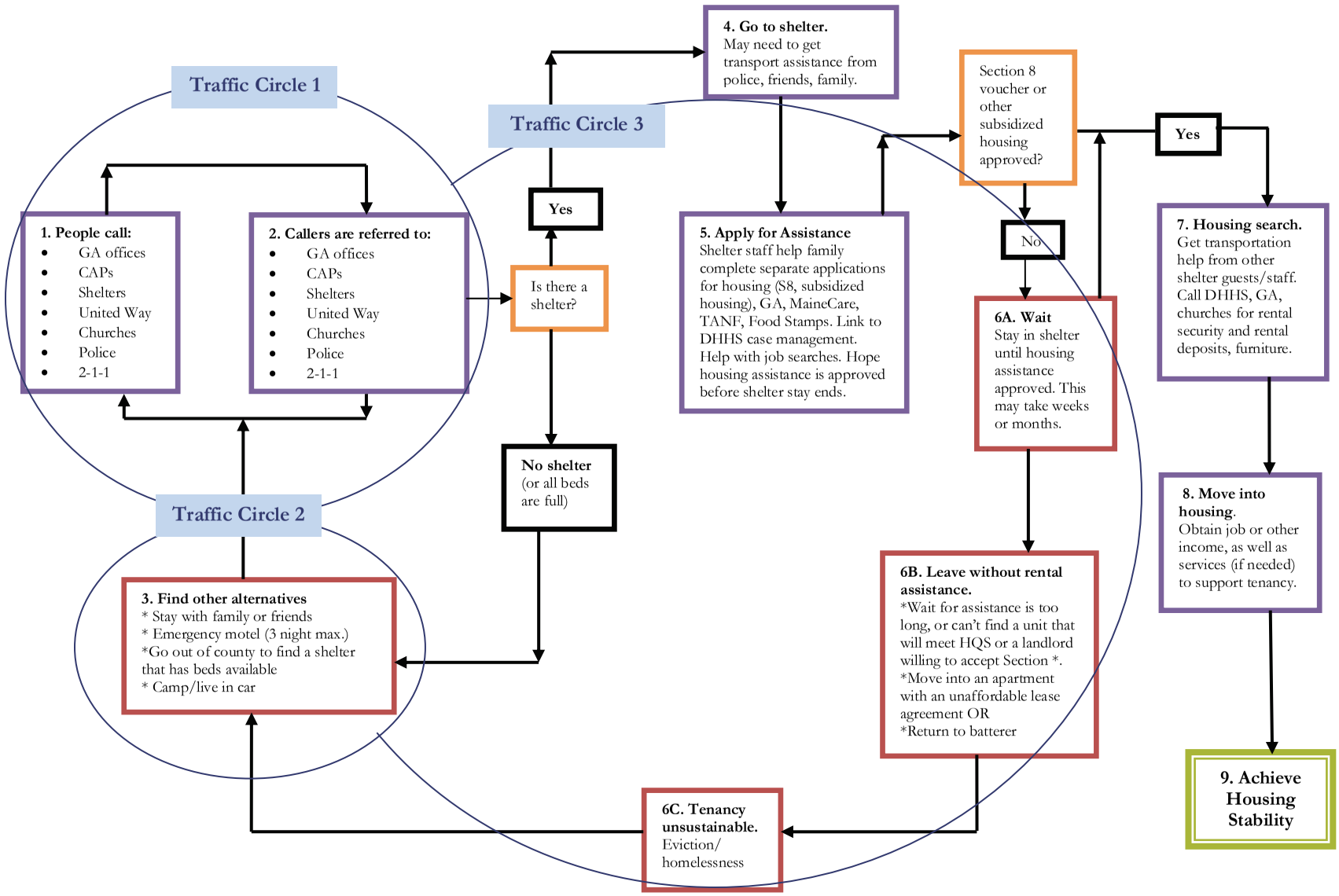
Since assessment generally takes place at the shelter, one consequence of the couch surfing that happens in rural areas is that families may not get a thorough assessment. As a result, serious issues that will affect their ability to maintain stable housing may go undiagnosed for months.

5. Barriers to Housing Stability

Families become homeless for many reasons, so it is not surprising that they face multiple barriers to achieving housing stability. The flowchart on the following page illustrates the process families in rural areas may go through in transitioning out of homelessness. It is important to note that for many families the process is relatively linear and works well. Yet for others there are obstacles in the system that slow the process down or cause them to veer off course. It is a bit like getting trapped in a "traffic circle" or rotary in which the exit roads are blocked or not clearly marked, so they end up circling around and around looking for a way out, in the process blocking traffic and clogging the system.

The first traffic circle hazard is encountered in steps 1 and 2, in which families reach out to a variety of resources to prevent homelessness from occurring, and are directed on to others, which refer them back to where they started. Round and round they go, from 2-1-1 to GA to churches to a community action program, United Way, or other nonprofit provider. Exits from this traffic circle are more clearly marked for victims of domestic violence or for families with a member who has a mental illness. In York County, where more capacity exists to help families at risk of homelessness, it may also be easier to find the exit. In most other rural counties, families facing homelessness have a harder time finding their way out of this circle.

Rural Family Homelessness Flowchart



The second traffic circle roughly encompasses steps 1-3. Families trapped in this circle might go to a homeless shelter, but either no shelter exists locally or all beds are full. While they wait for assistance that would help move them to housing stability they may live in their cars or a campground, or move in temporarily with friends or family. They face a dilemma, though. If they remain in their cars or a campground or some other highly substandard housing they can qualify for Section 8 vouchers for people who are homeless. The hitch is they need to be living there at both the time of their application and when the voucher becomes available. If at any time they move in with friends or family they are no longer homeless and must start the process over again in steps 1 and 2.

The third and last traffic circle hazard can occur in steps 5-6, when they are in a homeless shelter and have applied for housing subsidies. These may include a Section 8 voucher, public housing, or some other privately owned but publicly subsidized rental housing. Waiting lists for this housing assistance can be long, and even with MaineHousing's homeless preference for the Section 8 vouchers the wait may take weeks. Once they get a voucher they have 60 days to find both a landlord who will rent to them and an apartment that will meet HUD's housing quality standards. The 60 day window may be extended 30 days if they can prove they are actively searching for a unit (by maintaining a log of their calls, for example). If they cannot find a willing landlord or a qualifying unit they lose the voucher and must start the process over again. Frustrated with the delays, some families leave the shelter to return to their abusive partner or to sign a lease on an apartment they cannot afford. Ultimately, these tenancies will be unsustainable and they will find themselves back in the first traffic circle (steps 1 and 2). Now, however, they face even larger obstacles because they have a poor tenant history, and may have unpaid electric or heating oil bills that will make it much harder to obtain another apartment.

A more detailed discussion of specific barriers, and recommendations for overcoming them, follows in the next section.

Achieving and Maintaining Housing Stability

Barriers to families achieving and maintaining housing stability are listed below. These solutions may be more popular or work better in some counties than in others. Any effort to implement these strategies should involve rural homeless shelter and service providers in the planning and program design.

Prevention of Homelessness

- When families wait until the last minute to ask for help the chances of preventing homelessness are reduced. Even a few weeks notice may give providers the opportunity to put together a plan to help them recover housing stability. While families may wait because they do not want to admit they need help, in other cases they may simply be unaware that resources may be available to help them avoid homelessness.
  Recommendation: create a "Don't Wait Too Late" ad campaign, similar to the "Don't Borrow Trouble" campaign that was used to educate borrowers about predatory lending, to reach out to families living on the edge. The campaign would encourage families to seek help before their circumstances became dire, and inform them of where to go for assistance.

- For some families at risk of homelessness the gap in resources required to keep them housed is relatively small; it might simply be a rent deposit, a car repair, some gas money, or help catching up on rent that was unpaid due to a job loss or illness. In some cases a little extra help might make it possible for families to continue to living with friends or family until they can find work and move into a unit of their own. Rural providers cobble together these resources when they can, but stretched as thin as they are it is difficult to raise all the funds they need. The MaineHousing Winter Emergency Response Fund offers an excellent model for how a relatively small amount of funds, $55,000, can be used flexibly by shelters to prevent unsheltered homelessness in the coldest months of the year.
  Recommendation: establish a flexible fund in each rural county that can be used to fund critical gaps that can prevent homelessness or help families obtain housing.
- In rural counties, particularly those with few or no shelter resources, much confusion exists about where families can go for help and what resources are available. This confusion exists not just for families but for providers, who by necessity are generalists who know a little about a lot of programs but may not have expertise in, for example, Section 8 or GA program requirements.
  Recommendation: create and fund a single point of contact within each county for helping to prevent homelessness, and to support families who become homeless find the resources they need to transition to housing stability. This position could oversee use of the flexible funds described in the preceding bullet.
- While GA can be a resource in both preventing homelessness and helping families obtain stable housing, there are many barriers to its use. GA offices in small rural towns may be open only a few hours a week, which limits access. GA administrators do the job on a very part-time basis and are not always knowledgeable about program requirements or about other resources available to help families who are homeless. There is also no incentive for towns to use their GA to assist needy families, since any unused funds can be directed back to their general fund at the end of the year.
  Recommendation: work with the GA system to improve access to these funds for preventing and resolving family homelessness.
- Planning and resource development should be driven by data. In several of the rural counties there is insufficient data on the numbers of families who are at risk of or are actually homeless, and what resources they need in order to return to housing stability.
  Recommendation: support data collection efforts in rural counties, such as those in Franklin and Washington Counties, to improve knowledge about the numbers of families needing assistance.
- Confusion exists about what resources exist to assist families who are homeless, and where they should go for help.
  Recommendation: support rural housing and services providers in articulating the continuum of care that exists within their counties or regions to assist families facing homelessness. This information can then be fed to the 2-1-1 system and the single point of contact.

Moving from Homelessness to Stable Housing

- Rural service providers report a shortage of affordable housing on the private market that is of good quality. Thus, even if families who are homeless can get a Section 8 voucher, they may have difficulty within the 60 day window finding a unit that meets housing quality standards.
  Recommendation: improve availability of affordable housing in rural towns, preferably near to where jobs and services are concentrated.

- Landlords frequently do not want to rent to Section 8 voucher holders. More education is needed of landlords, so they have a better understanding of the Section 8 program; and of families so they know their housing rights and responsibilities.
  Recommendation: recruit landlords and educate them about the Section 8 program and housing quality standards. Provide support when families' behavior threatens their tenancy.

- The Section 8 voucher system in rural areas is confusing to both providers and families. At issue is the fact that the vouchers are administered by a patchwork of agencies, each of which has defined geographic boundaries and has some latitude in how it administers the voucher. MaineHousing contracts with nonprofits to administer the Section 8 program in rural Maine, outside of towns and cities. Altogether, there are 25 other Section 8 voucher administrators in the state, about 10 of which operate in towns within rural counties. Only MaineHousing has a homeless preference for its Section 8 program, meaning that families who are homeless rise to the top of the waiting list. None of the other voucher administrators has elected to use this preference. These administrators have long waiting lists, and for extended periods they may even close their lists because there are already so many people on it.

  Because MaineHousing uses the homeless preference, families in rural areas can get a Section 8 voucher much more quickly; in weeks or a couple of months, as opposed to a year or more in the cities and towns. However, families must live in a MaineHousing service area for at least a year before they try to "port in" to a city or town that administers its own Section 8 voucher program. This presents families who are homeless with several poor options. They can accept a Section 8 voucher from MaineHousing and live outside a town or city, farther from schools, services, and jobs, often without access to reliable transportation. They can try to hold out until a voucher in a town or city is available, which might mean spending many more months being homeless, couch surfing or doubled up in cramped environments. Or they can elect not to wait for a voucher and sign a rental agreement they cannot honor, which will eventually result in a recurrence of homelessness. Now they are in worse trouble, as their poor tenant history will make it difficult for them to find another landlord willing to accept them as tenants. In some cases, battered women will return to their abusers rather than waiting until their voucher is approved.

  It is very confusing for families who are desperate for housing to hear that they cannot use the voucher they receive from MaineHousing in a town that has its own local housing authority.
  Recommendation: create a more seamless system for helping people who are homeless access available vouchers and use them to live near jobs and services.

- Families without a permanent address often lack access to a phone where they can make calls or a voice mailbox where they can receive messages. This hampers communication with potential employers or landlords.
  Recommendation: work with phone companies to provide voice mailboxes for families for time limited periods in order to expedite communication with landlords and employers.

- It is very difficult for families who do not have a permanent address to manage the paperwork associated with applying for housing from a number of different sources. Each administrator of Section 8 vouchers, and manager of a subsidized housing project, requires a separate application. In Maine, there are approximately 244 HUD-assisted multi-family properties, and 324 USDA Rural Development assisted rental projects. These numbers do not include projects assisted with other resources, including the Low Income Housing Tax Credit or MaineHousing mortgage revenue bonds. Each separate project requires families to complete a separate application form. In order to maximize their likelihood of qualifying for a unit families must apply to multiple properties and keep track of the progress of each of them separately, which is difficult to manage.
  Recommendation: develop an online common application, not unlike the colleges that use a common application form, to facilitate the application process for subsidized housing.

- Some rural providers noted that it is difficult for families to keep track of what programs or resources they have applied for, when they applied, and the current status of these applications. This problem is exacerbated by families who couch surf for extended periods, or who have low literacy levels, as they may not be able to keep track of relevant paperwork. This results in duplication of effort and in lost opportunities, as families may apply again to resources to which they have already applied, or fail to ask for assistance from a program that might help them.
  Recommendation: research the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of issuing "smart cards" to families that can record this information electronically. They would thus only have to keep track of a card which they could keep in their wallet. A limited number of providers, including shelters or the single point of contact, could have technology that would permit them to read and update the data on the card. This would significantly improve communication among providers who are providing assistance to at-risk and families who are homeless.

- Strategic use of technology can improve operating efficiencies. While hardware and software can be expensive, some software is free and readily accessible to those who already have an internet connection. Fannie Mae, for example, has developed Home Counselor Online, a web-based housing counseling application that is available for free to nonprofit organizations. It may be possible to use a platform such as this to expedite the process of completing standard forms and applications for people who are homeless. Other free shareware can allow staff housed in disparate locations to log on to meetings in which they can share documents and information (FreeConference.com); dial in to telephone conference calls (FreeAudioConferencing.com); or expedite scheduling of meetings involving multiple people with busy schedules (MeetingWizard.com).
  Recommendation: invest in training, and in updated hardware and software, to help rural providers use their scarce time more efficiently.

- Rural providers are often hampered in their ability to assist families facing homelessness because they lack the time to plan and coordinate care with other providers, and they wear so many hats it is difficult for them to stay on top of changes in available resources. Working in isolated areas as they do, it is much harder for them to participate in face-to-face meetings with peer organizations.
  Recommendation: use technology to increase opportunities for rural providers to participate in mainstream resources trainings or other planning and information sharing sessions.
- Rural providers note anecdotally that they are seeing an increase in teen parents and young families, in roughly the 16-24 year old range, who lack skills needed to live independently. These young parents may not have finished high school or have only a GED. They may not know how to cook, shop, maintain an apartment, budget to meet their expenses, or parent. Often from backgrounds filled with family conflict, they are unlikely to get this assistance from their families.
  Recommendation: create additional transitional housing opportunities, or create staffing that can provide supports to young families to help them learn skills that will prevent future homelessness.
- We need a broader definition of homelessness for rural areas that includes families who couch surf when shelters are not available or when their only other option is living on the streets or in their car. For example, Head Start uses the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness that includes those who who lack a *fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence*, but considers sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason as evidence of homelessness.
  Recommendation: work to create new resources such as the flexible fund and the single point of contact that can assist families meeting this broader homeless definition.

6. Conclusion

In rural areas, where shelters are not easily accessible or are nonexistent, families and the providers who assist them are triply penalized.

A. Since families cannot access shelters they cannot easily be classified as homeless, which prevents them from accessing programs and housing that could help them become re-housed;

B. It is possible to "earn" the homeless label by spending 3-5 nights in a car or other place unfit for human habitation. This requires verification from a public official, such as a county sheriff, that the family is in the car between the hours of midnight and 5 am for several nights in a row. The verification requirement adds burden to a system that is already under-resourced. For families with children, this extends their dislocation and puts them at risk of further harm, especially during colder weather. This is not a burden placed on those who can access a homeless shelter.

C. Where they exist, shelters act as portals through which families who are homeless can access needed housing and other resources. When shelters do not exist, there is no parallel system set up to help families regain housing stability.

Rural nonprofits do have some capacity to assist families who are at-risk of or are experiencing homelessness. There are some shelters. Nonprofit providers have offices, phone systems and computers. They even have some staff that can devote some time to helping families in need sort through options and develop a plan. But these staff people often have many other responsibilities, and they lack access to financial or other resources that can help families avoid homelessness or expedite their transition from it.

Similarly, rural families who are homeless or at-risk are often not without resources. They may have friends and family with whom they can stay until they get on their feet. They may have cars, jobs, or a decent work history. They may simply lack some key resources needed to help them stay housed or to transition rapidly back to housing stability.

Finding cost-effective ways to address the needs of families who are homeless in rural areas of the state will require us to find ways to build on and extend the capacity that already exists. Strategic investment in resources that can support families and their natural support systems is the most cost-effective way to prevent homelessness. Funds that can be used flexibly to pay back rent, a large utility bill, a car repair, or gas to help get someone to and from work may be all that is needed to see a family through a rough patch.

When homelessness cannot be prevented, expediting connection to the housing and other resources needed to move out of the shelter will shorten stays and improve the likelihood that families will remain stably housed going forward.

Appendix 1

Focus Group Participants

(Note: This includes people who could not attend the focus group but were interviewed separately.)

Rumford- Oxford County

Paula Paladino, Rumford Group Homes
Therese Johnson, Rumford Group Homes
Lisa McGee, Community Concepts, Inc.

Farmington- Franklin County

Lisa Laflin, United Way
Ernest Gurney, New Beginnings
Janet Thomas, Community Concepts, Inc.
Tania Gage, Western Maine Community Action
Lisa Lemieux, Community Concepts, Inc. (Head Start)

Dover-Foxcroft- Piscataquis County

Sarah Hanscome, Womancare
Cheri Snow, Penquis
Shannon Bonsey, Penquis
Cindy Freeman Cyr, Womancare
Stephen Mooers, Penquis

Machias- Washington County

Chris Roberts, HUD
Michelle Potter, Next Step
Betsy Fitzgerald, Town of Machias
Cindy Look, Public Health
Tim King, Washington-Hancock Community Agency
Clayton Cleaves, Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy HA

Presque Isle/Houlton- Aroostook County

Jody Tompkins, Aroostook County Action Program
Vicky Bolstridge, Aroostook County Action Program
Susan O'Clair Aroostook County Action Program
Pat Smith, Battered Women's Project
Jennifer Glidden, Battered Women's Project
Susan Mitchell, Homeless Services of Aroostook
Jane Root, Maliseet DV & Sexual Assault
Cathy St. John, Maliseet DV & Sexual Assault
Donna Baietti, Battered Women's Project
Jamie Cleary, Battered Women's Project

Alfred- York County

Jen Ouellette, York County Shelters
Wes Phinney, York County Shelters
Cindi Peoples, Caring Unlimited
Mike Knight, York County Community Action Head Start
Chris Laroche, York County Community Action Housing
Donna Flink-Linley, Caring Unlimited