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New Jersey Counties Demonstrate Effective Use of Homeless Trust Funds

by Michael Anderson // 2014, Spring



In September 2008, New Jersey passed Public Law 2009 Chapter 123 which permits a county to impose a surcharge of \$3 on each document recorded and deposit these funds into a county homelessness trust fund. Funds can be used solely for the operation of a homelessness housing grant program, with five per cent allowed annually for costs related to the administration of the fund.

To date eight counties throughout the state have adopted and begun implementation of these homeless trust funds, including: Bergen, Camden, Hudson, Mercer, Middlesex, Passaic, Somerset and Union. In a 2012 report, more than \$1 million had been collected in 2011 in these counties.

Last fall, Mercer County contracted, through a competitive application process, for \$370,000 of Homeless Trust Fund Dollars. Activities funded include:

- Expansion of Robinson House at the Rescue Mission of Trenton to provide permanent affordable housing;
- Funds to support prevention services including back rent, mortgage, utilities and a shallow subsidy program to provide rental support over the long term for SSI or SSDI recipients to avoid eviction; and
- Supportive services for eighteen individuals who are receiving rental vouchers for chronic homelessness.

An additional \$280,000 in funds was collected during the 2013 fiscal year and will be released early in 2014.

Somerset County's homeless trust fund was created in 2010 and has helped households regain security through rental assistance enabling them to buy their own home, go back to school, or obtain higher paying jobs. Those eligible for the program receive an average monthly stipend of \$250 throughout a period during which they meet with a case manager, apply to a savings-match program and attend educational classes.

To date the fund has collected \$511,511 to benefit nineteen households participating in the program. Two persons secured jobs sufficient to enable them to exit the program.

The New Jersey law permits the Homeless Trust Funds to be used for: (1) the acquisition, construction, or rehabilitation of housing projects, or units within housing projects, that supply permanent affordable housing for homeless persons or families, including those at risk of homelessness; (2) rental assistance vouchers, including tenant and project based subsidies, for affordable housing projects or units within housing projects that provide permanent affordable housing for homeless persons or families, including those at risk of homelessness; (3) supportive services as may be required by homeless individuals or families in order to obtain or maintain, or both, permanent affordable housing; and (4) prevention services for at risk homeless individuals or families so that they can obtain and maintain permanent affordable housing. Any monies in the trust fund that are not expended after four years will be transferred to the Department of Community of Affairs which will contract with a community based organization in the same county where the Homelessness Trust Fund exists for the purposes of law.

To establish the fund a county must have or be in the process of developing a ten year plan and they will need to pass an ordinance to establish the Homeless Trust Fund and begin to collect the surcharge. Housing advocates have developed a sample ordinance. In addition, the county must establish a County Homelessness Trust Fund Task Force to advise local government on the creation of homeless housing plans and programs, assess priorities for funding, review applications, and prepare an annual report and measure utilization.

For additional information, contact Arnold Cohen, Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey, 145 W Hanover St, Trenton, NJ 08618 (609-393-3752) www.hcdnnj.org or Richard Brown, Monarch Housing Associates, 29 Alden Street, Suite 1B, Cranford, NJ 07016 (908-272-5363 x 225). Their website <http://monarchhousing.org> keeps updated information on the County homeless trust funds.



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