



OnPoint in Allegan garners homeless assistance funding

By Gari Voss

OnPoint, that assists individuals and families, has been awarded a three-year grant of \$411,533 from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The funds are earmarked to assist homeless individuals and families across Allegan County.

Allegan County, through Community Mental Health – now OnPoint, has been the lead agency for assisting individuals and families with housing needs. For years, this arm of the agency has existed with one fulltime employee who has taken calls, followed-up with interviews and visits, and assisted with developing plans to find solutions.

The needs across the county are more than a single person can humanly handle. Even though the case manager knows the county geographically, is familiar with the needs, and has assisted the homeless for more than twenty years, there is not enough time.

Program Director Susan Conrad shared, “We live in a community that is working together for the most vulner-

able. We do not have all of the answers, but we have the capacity to respond to real needs and design more than a short-term solution.”

Conrad was able to develop the request for funding from a HUD bonus round of funding with the support of the county collaborative body and OnPoint’s housing manager. This was a competitive grant through the Michigan Balance of State Continuum of Care (MIBOSCOC) that targeted rural counties. She believes that the success relied on collaboration with the Multi-agency Collaborative Council that is tied into the Michigan state homeless system.

Thankful for working with a Council that recognized the gaps, Conrad shared that the collaborative body earmarked the need for additional staff to “open the front door” into more housing programs and support. Adding additional staff will provide time – time for not just talking to someone, but talking with them about their unique situation, their possible options, and how OnPoint can help.

Conversation can lead to

putting together a plan that goes beyond short-term to long-term solutions. Conrad acknowledges, “It is important to walk along side someone as they sort things out. We are excited to add the two new positions that will address the time issue.”

The two 40-hour positions will be two-fold. One will help support the current case manager who is attempting to respond to numerous phone calls and emails. Then going out to do follow-up visits.

The other will be 100% community based. That is, working in the community to identify homeless folks who may be sheltering in neighboring counties and even to work with the DNR and parks commissions to locate people living in county and state parks. This person will truly be a community outreach worker.

“Case managers need time to go beyond the need for shelter. Many homeless people are frozen in the moment. OnPoint workers can assist them in identifying their resources, support systems and safe shelters until a more long-term solution can be obtained.

Each situation is unique and possibilities for solutions are diverse. Conversation and the proper guidance can identify options for today that lead to tomorrow’s resolution,” Conrad explained.

“Homeless individuals need to be able to look at their strengths. One being their resilience. Then tap into their skills and support systems to come to a conclusion. Often a simpler solution is the best one to solve the problem,” added Conrad.

If all goes on schedule, the funds will be available beginning in June. At that time, job descriptions will be available, postings can be made and case managers hired. The team will then begin the expanded services across the county.

The OnPoint team will become part of the broader system. While they provide on the ground information on trends, the Collaborative can be utilize the data to create the space to talk about what can be done better.

“The time is perfect because of identifying the need being out there, but also for using what we are

learning in order to improve the broader system that we are dealing with,” stated Conrad.

As summer approaches and staff is hired, OnPoint will create materials highlighting the process and goals of the program. These can be distributed across the county to agencies, churches, schools, doctor offices, and libraries so individuals understand how to assist people in accessing the housing assistance program.

The OnPoint team will strive to share information about what the program can and cannot do. At the same time, other support systems will be included in solutions to best meet the needs of the clients.

“We live in a community that is working together to address some gaps of the most vulnerable. This is really at the heart of what we are trying to do,” reiterated Conrad. “We don’t have all the answers, but we are trying to have enough of the right capacity to respond as effectively as we can.”

As pointed out by Mark Witte, executive director of OnPoint, “This effort focuses on people who

need assistance. There are solutions that go well beyond buildings that bring together people who need assistance.”

Conrad added, “The managers want to engage with the people solve long-term problems. It is really problem solving with folks who are homeless. We are trying to help people look at their unique situations to find the best solution for their needs.”

The work has just begun in the OnPoint’s housing division. There will be documentation to identify eligibility, handling calls and making connections. A smooth response flow of services must be established.

In the meanwhile, the agency will continue responding to calls and requests for assistance from people facing housing needs. The goal is to be able to talk to groups and agencies about how the process works and what the team hopes to accomplish.

Those seeking assistance can call OnPoint at 269-686-5124 or email customerservices@onpointallegan.org.