

United Way launches pilot project to end chronic homelessness in Valley

by Sebastien Bauge

The Valley of the Sun United Way is partnering with the Arizona Department of Health Services and the city of Tempe on a pilot project that will provide 35 affordable housing units to people who have been homeless for more than a year.

The units will be available at various Tempe locations starting this year.

The project is a step toward VSUW's goal of reducing homelessness in Maricopa County by 75 percent in the next 10 years. The plan is eventually to implement a permanent housing project that will continue through 2020. The program is meant to target the chronically homeless, or individuals that have been without a residence for more than a year.

VSUW officials estimate there are about 8,000 homeless people living in Maricopa County.

Merl Waschler, VSUW president and CEO, said the chronically homeless generally require the most services. He said providing housing assistance to these individuals will help free resources for the newly homeless, a group that is growing because of the downtrodden economy.

"Our goal is to move the chronically homeless into permanent supportive housing so we raise the quality of life for these individuals and improve our community," Waschler said.

According to the Homelessness Resource Center, a program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, permanent supportive housing is meant to provide safe and affordable long-term rental housing while incorporating support services. The combination of the two is meant to address complex issues such as low incomes, mental illness, substance abuse and HIV/AIDS.

The initial Tempe units were made available with the assistance of federal stimulus funds allocated to the city and earmarked for rapid rehousing of individuals. Waschler said the Arizona Department of Health Services is aiding in the service side through its contract with state health care provider Magellan Health Services. VSUW fills in the gaps with funds acquired through individual unrestricted gifts, which have been directed to the program donors.

Waschler said he did not have financial figures for the cost of the pilot program readily available.

The Corporation for Supportive Housing estimated that Maricopa County would need 1,000 units of permanent supportive housing to end chronic homelessness.

The VSUW also is working to secure another 250 housing units by 2012. The ultimate goal is to have all the estimated 1,000 housing units secured by 2020.

“We hope to use the Tempe pilot as a demonstration model for all of Maricopa County,” Waschler said.