

# Public hearing held on CDBG homeless initiative grant

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OAKLAND — The Garrett County commissioners are considering applying for funding to help address housing needs for local homeless residents. A hearing was held last week at the county courthouse to offer citizens the opportunity to learn more about the funding and to provide comments.

Community Action president Duane Yoder and Heather Hanline, Dove Center executive director, presented their ideas for how the money could be used.

"The Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) has a homeless initiative under its Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program," said Cindy Sharon, Garrett County Department of Economic Development project manager. "They're making \$2 million available statewide."

She indicated that more than one application could be submitted. The maximum amount of funding that Garrett County could apply for, however, is \$800,000, according to Yoder.

"This initiative is focused only on persons who are homeless, depending on the state's definition of homeless," he said.

He added that the CDBG grant could only be used to help those not currently being served.

"We've been hearing a lot of discussions about the need for some facility in Garrett County that would serve as a 'half-way house' for individuals coming out of prison," Yoder said.

He noted that Community Action did not have any specific plans at the moment, but the agency was interested in finding a facility that would house four-to-six individuals at a time. He added that Community Action has been discussing the issue with other area providers and that the Greater Cumberland Committee stressed the need for support facilities in its recent study on the local area's opioid crisis.

Yoder said he has discussed the issue with Hanline, who also has ideas for how to use the new CDBG grant.

"It's been almost exactly six years since we moved into the facility that we built with CDBG money, HCD and a lot of local support," Hanline

said about the Dove Center. "And, at the time that we built that, I envisioned that as phase one of a two-phase project."

The nonprofit organization provides a safe refuge, advocacy and counseling to victims of domestic violence and/or sexual assault. Located in Oakland, the center includes bedrooms, a kitchen, living room, laundry, administrative offices and counseling areas. Clients may stay there for up to 90 days.

"The second phase of that (Dove Center) project would be three units of transitional housing that would be built right behind our existing facility," Hanline said. "We own the field that's behind our building."

She said three months is not enough time for certain clients to get back on their feet.

"These are people who have had no experience in job hunting or holding down a job, no budgeting skills, possibly don't have a child care agent, a vehicle," Hanline said. "They just have a lot of hurdles to jump before they can go out and rent an apartment and be successful long term on their own."

She envisions a six- to 24-month transitional housing program in which clients would be provided with "intensive" case management services in the areas of employment counseling, occupational training, transportation, parenting, individual living skills, safety planning, and financial management. By the time they leave the program and center, they would be better equipped to find and keep a residence.

"They would have a much stronger likelihood of succeeding in permanent housing, as opposed to staying in our shelter for 60 to 90 days and not having the skills necessary to maintain that housing and then ending up back in our shelter a month later," Hanline said.

She noted that while staying in the center's transitional housing unit, clients would start paying rent on a gradual basis and progress, eventually, to paying the full amount.

"Any money gained from rent goes back into that transitional housing program," Hanline said, adding that additional grant money would be available to support operational costs.

She envisions having three double-wide modular homes to house clients. The Dove

Center would be the landlord and provide the support services.

"We really feel that we could do this for \$300,000," Hanline told the commissioners.

Local resident Doug Railey spoke at the hearing.

"I think it's a great idea, and I think it's something we need to do for the sake of the community," he said about providing housing assistance for homeless persons. "This isn't getting any better. It's getting a lot worse."

He noted there is much infrastructure already in place in the county, including the Dove Center and Community Action. The county could pick from those successes, build upon them and not have to build a facility "from the ground up."

He also commended the Sheriff's Office and Detention Center for helping homeless persons, particularly those with addictions.

"I found out that the inmates who come in there (the jail) are treated very well," Railey said. "They're treated with respect and dignity, and I think that's important for someone who has been arrested for a drug offense."

He stressed that persons with addictions need "some methodology in their lives," including counseling and peer supervision.

"I think any program that we would come up with or agree to ought to be a program primarily devoted to people who are willing to make some type of commitment, acknowledge that they need help and make a commitment to do what they need to do to get the help," Railey said.

Commissioner Jim Hinebaugh asked Yoder if the CDBG grant was for construction of a facility or for staffing.

"It's essentially a two-year grant that could be used for both services and capital," Yoder said, noting that additional funding would probably be needed to continue the services.

Sharon said the CDBG application or applications would be available for public review at the courthouse in Room 208 from Nov. 10, through Nov. 16, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Applications must be submitted to state officials by Nov. 17, according to Yoder.

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