

# Opinion

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In our view

## Finding a home

For years, communities have been doing what they could to manage homelessness. Utilizing shelters and temporary housing, community organizations here and elsewhere have helped get people off the streets and out of the weather.

Now the time has come to take the next step: To prevent homelessness as much as possible, and to help those who have become homeless to find permanent housing and to begin to rebuild their lives as quickly as possible.

To coordinate this effort, Lancaster County Commissioners last week agreed to fund the position of a homeless adviser whose job will be to bring organizations together in a coordinated effort to help those threatened by homelessness to find permanent housing, enhance their employment skills and help them become self-reliant once again. The county is funding the position, but the homeless adviser will be a United Way employee.

Although the position is new, Lancaster's commitment to the homeless is not. A host of volunteer and charitable groups from churches to community service organizations has long provided help to indigent clients.

Tabor Community Services was among the first organizations in the state to aid the homeless, seeking temporary and, in some cases, permanent housing for those who no longer could afford to live in their homes.

Lancaster's Interagency Council for the Homeless was formed in the early 1990s with the goal of managing the homeless situation. For the past dozen years, ICH has developed a continuum of care program that uses federal Housing and Urban Development funds to provide housing and help get people back on their feet.

But with so many organizations — from churches to shelters to non-profit agencies — each trying to do as

much as possible, ICH's Continuum Care subcommittee decided that a homeless adviser would benefit organizations as well as the homeless by combining efforts and better managing resources.

HUD also requires community groups such as ICH to have a 10-year plan to go along with annual plans. An adviser will be able to help guide requests and determine if annual requests and programs fit with the philosophy of the 10-year plan.

Kay Moshier McDivitt, vice president for programs for Tabor Community Services, said the plan is to "close the front door" by creating programs to help people stay out of homeless situations; "open the back door" by getting existing homeless people out of transient housing and into permanent housing as quickly as possible, and build the infrastructure to reach both of those goals.

It's important to note that the term homelessness does not just apply to people living on the street but to those without a permanent address. It includes people who are forced to stay with friends and/or family because they can no longer afford to live in their homes. A count undertaken in January found 633 people who were then homeless. Some, however, believe that number is low. In February 2006, School District of Lancaster officials listed the number of children who were homeless at 900.

The United Way of Lancaster County reported that roughly 40 percent of those children lived in shelters and another 29 percent lived with family or friends.

Lancaster County Commissioners deserve credit for their willingness to fund the position and to address the issues surrounding homelessness.

This community has done wonders when it comes to managing homelessness. The next step is to put in place plans and procedures to eradicate it.