



## Home First! Kern County's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness At Five Years

### Introduction

During the latter half of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the **Kern County Homeless Collaborative (KCHC)**—which has existed since 1998—reached a new level of maturity in the fight against homelessness.

In 2005, the KCHC...

- Adopted **bylaws** that continue to govern its work;
- Implemented a database, the **Homeless Management Information System (or HMIS)**, which is mandated by the **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)** for the purpose of collecting, managing, analyzing and reporting data on the homeless in our community, in an effort to better understand their needs;
- Began planning to conduct point-in-time counts of the homeless known as the “**Homeless Census**” every other year, with a view toward eventually conducting them yearly (a goal that has since been reached); and
- Started drafting ***Home First! Kern County's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness***.

A lofty project, ***Home First!*** was compiled by **KCHC Fiscal Sponsor United Way of Kern County** and formally introduced to the community in **May 2008** by **City of Bakersfield Mayor Harvey L. Hall**, a local champion in the fight against homelessness, and the **Chair of the Homeless Collaborative's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness Committee**. ***Home First!*** may be read in its entirety and downloaded from both the **Homeless Collaborative's website** ([www.kernhomeless.org](http://www.kernhomeless.org)) > ***Click on the Home First! blue logo in the center of the page***) and **Mayor Hall's Home Page on the City of Bakersfield's website** ([www.bakersfieldcity.us](http://www.bakersfieldcity.us)) > ***Click on Mayor & City Council under City Government > Click on Mayor's Homelessness Plan on the left-hand menu***).



## Happy Fifth Birthday, Home First!

Five years have passed since that 112-page 10-Year Plan was published. These are years that have been fraught with economic instability, including the Great Recession; more than 31,800 foreclosures in Kern from May 2008 to April 2013, according to the County Assessor's Office; prevailing double-digit unemployment countywide; and local, state and federal government cutbacks to services for the homeless and at-risk due to a greatly diminished tax base. Despite these challenges, the Kern County Homeless Collaborative has grown in membership, increased the local housing stock dedicated to serving the homeless, expanded its service and outreach project offering, and dramatically reduced homelessness locally by 23%--from 1,499 homeless persons counted in January 2009, less than a year after Home First! was published, to 1,152 counted in the latest Homeless Census of January 2013.

What follows is a brief look at how far the KCHC has come during the first five years of **Home First!** in furthering its mission:

***"To put an end to homelessness in Kern County through collaborative planning and action."***

KCHC accomplishments will be presented in the context of the **Three (3) Main Objectives** and **Fifteen (15) Main Goals** we set for ourselves in the 10-Year Plan.

### **Home First! Objectives and Goals**

**Objective #1:** *Close the front door to homelessness by preventing homelessness whenever possible by...*

**Goal # 1:** *Ensuring reduced evictions.*

**Goal #2:** *Increasing incomes and financial stability for people who are homeless or at risk for homelessness.*

In late 2009, the Obama Administration, through the **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)** introduced the **Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP)**, which combines such efforts as those highlighted under Goals #1 and #2 of Kern's 10-Year Plan: Reducing evictions by preventing homelessness for those at risk; rapidly re-housing those unfortunate enough to have entered the homeless ranks; and increasing incomes and financial stability for the homeless and at-risk by providing them with multi-month rental assistance, financial literacy classes, job training and placement, linkage to benefits, and other services. Close to \$3.5 million in HPRP funds were awarded to our jurisdiction through the **County of Kern** and the **City of Bakersfield**, which sub- or sub-sub-contracted the delivery of HPRP services through such local service providers as **Bakersfield Homeless Center (BHC)**, **Employers Training Resource**, **Alliance Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault**, **Flood Bakersfield Ministries** and **Greater Bakersfield Legal Assistance**.



The local success of HPRP, largely through the efforts of **County/City main sub-grantee BHC, which assisted 790 families and reduced homeless shelter stays, on average, from 6-12 months to 3-4 months**, was key in helping to reduce homelessness locally from 2009 to 2012. Local HPRP efforts have been lauded by HUD and the **National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH)**.

Furthermore, HPRP has since been formally espoused as a best-practices model by HUD and the **Veterans Administration** (through its **Supportive Services to Veterans and Families (SSVF) Program**--a sort of HPRP for vets). VA-SSVF dollars, as well as HUD Rapid Re-Housing dollars through the **Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) Program**, continue to flow into Bakersfield and Kern County. The main local SSVF player, which has also accessed close to a million dollars in federal moneys to prevent and reduce homelessness among veterans, is **California Veterans Assistance Foundation (CVAF)**, which also organizes the annual **Kern County Veterans Stand Down**. CVAF and the local VA's efforts to link veterans to housing and services, helped reduce Veterans homelessness by 22% between 2011 and 2013.

Finally, the KCHC's **SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access & Recovery) Program**, which is only in its first year, aims to increase income and financial stability through quick access to Social Security disability benefits for homeless persons, targeting especially those who are mentally ill and suffer from a co-occurring substance use disorder. **In just a little over six months, 49 local benefits specialists and case managers have been trained in the SOAR method** and are helping the homeless in their care to access SSA benefits.

**Goals No. 1 and 2 of Home First!, therefore, are being met through the above actions.**

**Goal #3: *Establishing coordinated discharge planning, to ensure people are not released into homelessness from hospitals, correctional institutions or the foster care system.***

**This goal is being met.**

In October of 2009, **Kern County Administrative Bulletin (AB) 29**, the County's "Policy for Compliance with Federal Discharge Coordination Requirement" (US Code 42), was revised and recognized by the **County Board of Supervisors**. AB29 helps ensure adherence to practices that limit discharge into homelessness from publicly funded institutions or systems of care, including mental/medical healthcare facilities, foster care, and correctional institutions. The KCHC's advocacy efforts were largely responsible for ensuring support from local policymakers for an officially recognized countywide discharge planning policy.

Also, beginning in mid-2011, the KCHC's **Discharge Planning Committee** tripled the frequency of its meetings from quarterly to monthly, and began engaging **City and County Law Enforcement, the Community Corrections Partnership, Kern County Mental Health, and foster care and medical/mental health care providers** in a greater way in local homeless discharge planning efforts. **The payoff for this hard work was reflected in the 2013 Point-in-Time Homeless Census, where 39% fewer persons surveyed reported release from jail or prison as a direct cause of their homelessness than in the previous full Census of 2011.**

**Goal #4:** *Increasing capacity and accessibility to no-cost or low-cost substance abuse treatment and mental health care services in the community.*

### **Housing for Mentally Ill Homeless Clients**

There are three permanent supportive housing (PSH) projects that provide affordable housing and on-site services for mentally ill homeless persons in a partnership among KCHC members **Kern County Mental Health Department, the Housing Authority of the County of Kern (KERNHA) and Golden Empire Affordable Housing, Inc. (GEAHI):**

1. Green Gardens (GG) Single Room Occupancy Apartments – 90 beds (GEAHI managed)
2. Haven Cottages (HC) One-Bedroom Affordable Rental Homes – 23 beds (GEAHI managed)
3. Residences at West Columbus (RWC) – 20 One-Bedroom Units for Mentally Ill Homeless Transition Age Youth/Emancipating Foster Youth (KERNHA managed)

Close to one-third of the above 133 beds (i.e., 43 HC + RWC beds) were created in the five years since **Home First!** was launched.

Other long-term residential (including Transitional Housing) and outpatient substance abuse treatment and referral service options in Kern County include offerings by such KCHC member agencies as **Turning Point of Central California** (residential/outpatient), **Clinica Sierra Vista/Griffin's Gate** (recovery support/referrals), and **Kern County Mental Health (KCMH)** (outpatient recovery services/dual diagnosis/referrals).

There are also dozens of Kern County Probation Department-approved residential recovery programs such as **Operation Fresh Start, Freedom House, Bethany Ministries**, and others. However, monthly fees for services for many of these programs range from over \$500 to possibly more than \$2,000 in a few cases, making them less affordable for the homeless.

### **Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services**

#### **KCMH**

- **Crisis Services** are available through the **Mary K. Shell Center**, as an alternative to more restrictive care facilities such as hospitals. Its services include: A 24-hour toll-free crisis hotline; Support to families and significant others; Case management services and linkage to useful resources; Substance abuse referrals; and FREE substance abuse and recovery groups to individuals not receiving mental health services through KCMH.
- **Dual Diagnosis (Mental Health + Substance Abuse)** services are available through the **Consumer Family Learning Center's "Double Trouble" Program**. Recovery support services are FREE to all, including client family members, individuals not receiving mental health services, and those who are clients of the System of Care.
- **Substance Abuse** services are available to Medi-Cal recipients and Medically Indigent Adult clients through the **Gate Team**. Clients are screened on a first come, first served basis.
- **Direct Access** to services for homeless persons living on the street is available in partnership with **Flood Ministries' Street Outreach Team**, who can provide immediate linkage.



### **Kern Medical Center (KMC)**

- In 2012, Kern Medical Center became more engaged with the KCHC, attending Service Provider outreaches and meetings on a regular basis and designating some of its benefits specialists to be trained in SOAR to help homeless persons obtain SSA benefits quickly. Most importantly, KMC rolled out its **KMC Health Plan (KMCHP)** for underserved populations (including the homeless) in preparation for Affordable Care Act implementation in 2014. The KMCHP offers mental health and substance abuse services, including certain prescriptions, for those who qualify.

### **New Substance Abuse Outreach Opportunities**

In the last year, the KCHC has begun important partnerships with **Kern County Narcotics Anonymous** and **Alcoholics Anonymous** to ensure their information appears at the very top of resource/referral cards distributed to the homeless, and to include NA and AA representatives in KCHC monthly and annual outreaches. Also, in the fall of 2012, the KCHC began a partnership with the **Kern County Methamphetamine Reduction Task Force**, to begin addressing meth use among the homeless. KCHC members now distribute **KernStopMethNow** literature in English and Spanish at KCHC outreaches and regularly attend Meth Reduction Task Force committee meetings. Also, through improved Homeless Census efforts, the KCHC has identified that methamphetamine use affects one in every five adult homeless persons in Kern, and has highlighted these findings to raise awareness about the continued need for substance abuse services to the homeless.

**Through all of the above efforts, the KCHC is addressing Goal No. 4 of the 10-Year Plan.**

**Objective #2:** *Open the back door to housing stability by embracing a housing first model that focuses on rapid re-housing and provides security and opportunity along with wraparound services by...*

**Goal #5:** *Implementing a coordinated housing first model.*

**Goal #6:** *Implementing a fully integrated array of wraparound support services.*

Goals 5 and 6 of **Home First!** go together, as, from experience, the KCHC knows that while rapidly housing the homeless is key to their well-being, wraparound support services are what help ensure their long-term stability in housing, and, as applicable, in work, substance abuse recovery and continued access to cash/non-cash benefits. **The KCHC is meeting these goals** through a wide variety of projects and services available from its many member agencies. These projects and services include: **Project Homeless Connect; the Kern County Veterans Stand Down; Home First/100,000 Homes Campaign; successful aftercare and mentoring programs** for homeless persons once they have been housed; quicker linkage to Social Security disability benefits for qualifying homeless persons through the **SOAR Project**; and **on-site programs** such as GED,



job training and placement, and substance abuse/12-step groups, as well as homeless-children-focused services (e.g., daycare and after-school programs, independent living skills programs for emancipating foster youth) at KCHC member agencies serving various subpopulations of homeless clients.

Through community-wide education and diffusion of knowledge about each member agency's area of expertise, and **the current development of a coordinated assessment and intake process**, the KCHC is, every day, ensuring better quality referrals and service linkage leading to a true and seamless continuum of care for persons who are homeless and at risk.

**Through all of the above actions, the KCHC is helping our community to meet Goals 5 & 6.**

**Goal #7: *Conducting coordinated countywide outreach.***

Traditionally, due to a large concentration of services for the homeless in the Greater Bakersfield area, the KCHC has not had a problem meeting this goal in Metropolitan Bakersfield through a combination of site-based outreaches at local shelters and day centers conducted by the KCHC **Homeless Consumers & Service Providers Committee**, and limited street and one-day event outreaches such as the Veterans Stand Down and Project Homeless Connect.

**In areas outside of Metropolitan Bakersfield, this goal has begun to be met in a variety of ways.**

**First**, the countywide implementation of and community education regarding **2-1-1 Kern County** as a dedicated 24-hour Social Services information and referral line and website, puts important referrals just a toll-free phone call or web search away for homeless and at-risk persons throughout Kern, as well as for concerned family members and service providers.

**Second**, the launch in early 2012 of the **Homeless Collaborative's website**, [www.kernhomeless.org](http://www.kernhomeless.org), **whose development was made possible thanks to a personal gift from Mayor Hall**, created an online information, referral and networking hub for homeless clients seeking services, as well as for homeless service providers and other stakeholders throughout Kern County and anywhere on the web. Valuable information that can be printed and passed out as flyers to the homeless is also available for downloading from the website in English and Spanish.

**Third**, in 2012 the Homeless Collaborative's Homeless Consumers & Service Providers Committee and other KCHC leaders began conducting **direct service and educational outreaches in rural and unincorporated areas of Kern** including **Wasco, Oildale, Delano and the Kern River Valley communities of Wofford Heights, Kernville and Lake Isabella.**

**Fourth**, in December 2012, the KCHC elected its **first Steering Committee Chair from a rural Kern Community: Jim Wheeler, Executive Director of the City of Wasco Housing Authority, who is the previous KCHC Homeless Coordinator and the author of Home First!** This helped ensure a greater organizational sensitivity from the KCHC on issues pertaining to rural homelessness.



**Fifth:** In spring 2013, the KCHC Steering Committee approved **yearly Point-in-Time Counts of the Homeless**. Having a yearly countywide census of sheltered and unsheltered homeless throughout Kern will help the KCHC keep a better pulse on the needs of the homeless in rural communities.

**Finally**, also in spring 2013, the KCHC Steering Committee approved the launch of a **Rural Outreach Committee**, to be headed by East Kern partner **Women's Center High Desert**. This committee will meet quarterly on an ongoing basis, and more often as needed, to discuss and implement solutions to rural homelessness in Kern.

**Goal #8:** *Creating a full-time Homeless Coordinator position to help drive the work of the KCHC.*

**This goal was met in April of 2011**, when the **half-time Homeless Coordinator** position at **KCHC Fiscal Sponsor United Way of Kern County** was restructured into that of a **full-time Homelessness Project Manager**. Furthermore, in June of 2011, the new English/Spanish bilingual Homelessness Project Manager was also put in charge of the **FEMA-funded Emergency Food & Shelter Program (EF&SP)**, which is also administered by United Way. EF&SP provides upwards of half a million dollars a year to more than a dozen agencies (several of which are KCHC members and serving rural communities) to assist with such homelessness prevention efforts as emergency rent, mortgage, lodging, utilities and food assistance, as well as with the mass shelter and feeding efforts at homeless and domestic violence shelters and food banks throughout Kern. This restructuring has ensured a greater level of coordination in the local homelessness-fighting work, and has contributed to the growth of KCHC membership (from 19 to 26 dues-paying members since 2011) and the implementation of several new projects, including Project Homeless Connect, Home First (100,000 Homes Campaign), SOAR, Rural Outreaches, as well as to much-needed HUD and FEMA funding.

**Objective #3:** *Build a strong housing infrastructure by focusing on construction, rehabilitation and affordable housing preservation by...*

**Goal #9:** *Developing a public inebriate or safe haven center in Bakersfield.*

There are no public inebriate centers strictly for the homeless in Kern County, but such KCHC members as **Hearthstone Community Services** and **The Mission at Kern County** have, in the past, explored the possibility of establishing such a facility as a creative alternative to jail time for non-violent homeless inebriates. Further discussion is warranted with local Law Enforcement at the City and/or County level (including the Community Corrections Partnership), especially in light of high jail bed utilization rates since the California Safety Realignment Act (AB109) was implemented in the fall of 2011.

Neither are there safe havens (supportive housing that serves hard-to-reach homeless persons who suffer from severe mental illness) in Kern County. The prospect for implementing such facilities is slim, especially because HUD no longer funds safe havens.

The KCHC will continue to pursue Goal 9 regarding the implementation of a public inebriate center.



**Goal #10:** *Creating 520 new permanent supportive housing beds in Kern County.*

**This goal has been met and exceeded by 46%, as 761 new permanent supportive housing (PSH) beds have been created in Kern since *Home First!* was published.** This was accomplished largely through the utilization of **HUD Shelter + Care** and **Veterans Assisted Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers** administered through the **Housing Authority of the County of Kern (KERNHA)**. Housing vouchers make housing affordable for qualifying homeless individuals or families dealing with disabilities, while providing supportive aftercare services to ensure long-term housing stability. Furthermore, there are at least 58 additional PSH beds under development through HUD and VA-funded programs of California Veterans Assistance Foundation (16 beds) and KERNHA (42 beds).

**Goal #11:** *Creating 20 new emergency shelter beds in the rural areas.*

**This goal is on the way to being met as follows: In the Kern River Valley, Helping Hands Ministry, which is affiliated with The Salvation Army, has 2 seasonal emergency shelter beds available to the homeless in the winter; and the City of Delano currently has 24 beds under development at a new domestic violence shelter facility.**

As it begins its work in the latter half of 2013, the KCHC's new **Rural Outreach Committee** will undoubtedly identify the need for other shelter beds in Kern's rural communities and make recommendations for their possible development and implementation.

**Goal #12:** *Developing 150 new transitional supportive housing (TH) beds for individuals and families.*

At the 10-Year Plan halfway mark, **this goal is ahead of schedule**, as close to two-thirds of these beds (91 altogether) are accounted for as follows: **73 TH beds have been created among four agencies: Alliance Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault, Women's Center High Desert Domestic Violence Shelter, Griffin's Gate Sober Living Center and The Mission at Kern County;** and **18 additional TH beds are under development at Alliance.**

**Goal #13:** *Creating 500 new rental units countywide that are affordable to households earning less than 30% of area median income (AMI).*

**We are on target for meeting this goal.** There have been approximately **209** rental units targeted at 30% of AMI or less created through the **Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)** program since 2008, and **37** units at the **Baker Street Village Mixed Used Development Project** for a total of **246** units. Furthermore, **49 additional units are currently under development** as Phase II of the Baker Street Village Project, called the **Residences at Old Town Kern**. (It is worth mentioning that Baker Street Village--whose community center serves as the current site for KCHC Steering Committee meetings and special media and community awareness events--was honored with the 2012 Beautiful Bakersfield Chairman's Award for exemplifying the true meaning of "Bakersfield: Life as it should be.")

**Goal #14:** *Creating 50 new affordable homeownership units for households earning less than 60% of area median income.*



**Our community is on schedule to meet this goal.** A total of 28 of the 50 homeownership units have been made available to qualifying families since May 2008 as follows:

- **Habitat for Humanity Homes** has built 15 affordable homes with low-income homeowner “sweat equity” (i.e., homeowners help to build the home before moving in).
- **United Way of Kern County** has helped 13 low-income families purchase homes through its **Financial Independence Starts Here (FISH) Individual Development Account Program**, which rewards savers with the incentive of \$2 for every dollar saved toward a down payment.

**Goal #15:** *Preserving existing affordable housing in Kern County.*

In 2011, the **County of Kern** provided HOME funding to KCHC member **Golden Empire Affordable Housing, Inc.**, to purchase and rehabilitate the **48-unit Hallmark Apartment Complex in Lamont**, thereby preventing this property from converting to market rate—which would have made these units unaffordable to low-income families in Lamont, where the percentage of residents living below the poverty level is 28.8%, twice as high as that for the state of California as a whole (14.4%), and 7.4% points higher than Kern County (21.4%) according to 2007-2011 data from the U.S. Census.

## Conclusion

Our community is on target for meeting all objectives and 14 of **Home First!’s** 15 goals, and actually surpassing some of these goals at the five-year mark. Most importantly, all 10-Year Plan goals and objectives continue to be addressed with impressive results in homelessness reduction/homeless housing construction. **Home First!** will continue to help guide the **KCHC’s** work over the five years that remain before the plan reaches its maturity date.

A number of best practice models to reduce or end homelessness have been introduced to our community since the launch of **Home First!** including: **HPRP and its VA equivalent, SSVF, Project Homeless Connect, the 100,000 Homes Campaign, and SOAR.** The KCHC now has a fully functioning website ([www.kernhomeless.org](http://www.kernhomeless.org)) and Facebook Page, **Faces of Homelessness**, ([www.facebook.com/fohkern](http://www.facebook.com/fohkern)) that did not exist prior to **Home First!**; it is also getting ready to implement a no-wrong-door type of coordinated homeless intake and assessment system countywide; and is benefitting from **2-1-1 Kern County’s** enhancement of its telephone and online information and referral offerings. Therefore, **the KCHC is currently using technology more than it ever has before in the fight against homelessness.**

All of these efforts have helped to greatly reduce homelessness locally **by 23%** since **Home First!** came on the scene in 2008. While there is still much work to be done to ensure that local homelessness is eradicated altogether, **Home First!** will continue to be a good map and compass on our community-transforming journey toward zero homelessness led by the **Kern County Homeless Collaborative.**