Homlessness in America I – "Muncipal Strategies for Preventing and Managing Homelessness"

Background

Homeless individuals and families can be found on the streets, in parks, and other locations throughout the city of Las Vegas on any given day. Several factors have affected the increase in the incidence of homelessness despite the efforts of local government, service providers, the faith based community and advocates. Some factors include dwindling employment opportunities for people with a high school education or less; the supply of treatment and mental health services does not meet the community need; housing has become scarcer in recent years for those with little money, and earnings from employment have not kept pace with rapidly rising costs.

As families struggle to survive, the services needed to maintain stable lives become ever more difficult for the poorest citizens to afford, resulting in growing pressure on cities, counties and states to service increasing populations in need. According to the 2007 United Way Community Assessment, affordable housing, financial stability, health care and mental health are major concerns of planners and citizens alike. Their findings explains why people are at risk for homelessness in an environment defined by skyrocketing land and home prices, a record setting number of people losing their homes due to foreclosures, a decline in affordable apartments, and a lack of subsidized housing for those who need assistance.

Costs of Homelessness

For many it may seem that providing persons with shelter is cheaper than providing funds to place them into permanent housing. However, the cost of homelessness is staggering – there are incredible costs not only to the affected individuals and families in terms of decreased health and wellness and ability to meet the most basic needs, but also to the community in terms of real dollars.

According to The National Alliance to End Homelessness, the following are some national statistics regarding the ways in which homelessness can be costly to communities:

- Average annual overnight jail costs for a homeless person costs taxpayers $14,480.
- A typical cost of a prison bed in a state or federal prison is $20,000 per year.
- Emergency room visits cost an average of $3,722.
- Homeless individuals average two visits per year at $7,444 per homeless person. An average transport by ambulance costs $214.15.
- The average hospital stay is three days at an average cost of $4,440. Those who only access healthcare through the emergency room do not receive follow-up care or services beyond immediate intervention, making them more likely to return to the hospital in the future.
- The cost of an emergency shelter bed funded by HUD's Emergency Shelter Grants program is approximately $8,067 more than the average annual cost of a federal housing subsidy (section 8 housing certificate).

Perhaps the most difficult cost to quantify is the loss of future productivity. Decreased health and more time spent in jails or prisons means that homeless persons have more obstacles to contributing to society through their work and creativity as well as homeless children facing countless barriers to retaining education.

The impact of homeless individuals on hospitals, prisons, and social services is high, and because they do not have a stable place to live, homeless persons are at risk for a variety of poor outcomes including health problems, developmental delay for children, and incarceration. Preventing someone from becoming homeless, or providing a quick and efficient transition into stable permanent housing when homelessness cannot be prevented can result in a significant cost savings.

The nationwide launch of the ten year plan strategy to end homelessness ushers in a new paradigm of housing and service provision, one in which integration, adaptation and collaboration with all sectors of the community are critical.[8] This proven model has raised public awareness, engaged the private sector in seeking solutions to homelessness, increased philanthropic participation, and encouraged a greater number of local leaders to take notice of and seek constructive solutions for the problems of the homeless.

Research and evaluation has shown that communities across the country have been able to bring even the hardest to serve homeless on the streets and help them to establish stable lives if they are supplied with housing. Even clients who have extensive histories of substance abuse have been able to leave the streets when they were given access to permanent housing and supportive services. When costs are analyzed for these clients, the provision of housing compared to the costs of emergency treatment and shelter make this model virtually cost neutral and clearly more effective in improving outcomes for individuals and families.[9]

The State of Homelessness in Southern Nevada

Like most major urban areas, people living in Southern Nevada are looking for prospects of employment, a better life, retirement, and warmer weather. For many, Clark County is the land of opportunity, but for a growing number of individuals and families the prospect of being homeless is a constant worry. According to the 2007 United Way Community Assessment, affordable housing, financial stability, health care and mental health are major concerns of planners and citizens alike. Their findings about the difficulties families have affording housing help us to understand that many families are at risk for homelessness in an environment defined by skyrocketing land and home prices, a decline in affordable apartments, and a lack of subsidized housing for those who need assistance.[14]

In order to design a plan to end homelessness, Southern Nevada needed local data that could tell us who was experiencing homelessness in the Southern Nevada region. In collaboration with Applied Survey Research, the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition (SNRPC) Committee on Homelessness conducted a point in time (two day) homeless census on January 30 and 31, 2007. Results of the survey found an estimated

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11,417 people were homeless in the Southern Nevada region with the highest concentration located in the city of Las Vegas. A snapshot of the data concludes the following:

- 34% were identified in shelter facilities with 66% being unsheltered;
- 73% of survey respondents had been homeless less than one year, indicating higher than typical rates for temporary homeless in Southern Nevada than in other communities across the country;
- 33% had lived in Las Vegas less than one year; 38% had been living in Las Vegas more than 5 years; 43% came to Nevada to work; and 6% grew up in Las Vegas;
- approximately 7% of all survey respondents (sheltered and unsheltered) had children under the age of 18 living with them.
- 72% were male and 28% female with African Americans representing 33% of the homeless population, even though they make up only 9% of the general population;
- 43% of all survey respondents received their high school diploma or equivalent, and nearly 28% attended college or held a college degree;
- 50% of respondents indicated they had some disabling condition, with 24% experiencing some form of physical disability;
- 85% of respondents are unemployed with 35.1% becoming homeless after losing their job;
- 17.1% reported drug or alcohol abuse as the reason they lost their home;
- 25% of respondents are veterans;
- 21% represented chronic homelessness.

This data provides baseline information about the homeless population and is being used to benchmark progress as implementation of the ten year plan to end homelessness. The data in the 2007 Southern Nevada Homeless Census also provides information about the characteristics, likely causes, and contributing factors to homelessness in Clark County. Two primary reasons for homelessness included loss of employment (over 35%) and alcohol or substance abuse (over 17%). Other reasons articulated ranged from gambling problems, domestic violence, disputes with friend or family, illness or medical problems, divorce or separation, incarceration, mental health issues, landlord raised rent or landlord stopped renting.

It is important to note that point-in-time surveys are unable to capture homeless persons who experience short episodes of homelessness at different times of the year. Applied Survey Research used a formula created by the Corporation for Supportive Housing to arrive at the estimated number of homeless people in Clark County over the course of a given year. Using this formula, there are an estimated 50,656 persons who will experience homelessness this year in Clark County. This alarming statistic places Nevada at the top of the list of the nation's point-in-time homelessness rate. [16]

Regional Approach To Homeless

Southern Nevada continues to be one of the nation's fastest growing regions. The unprecedented growth creates challenges in maintaining basic quality of life elements

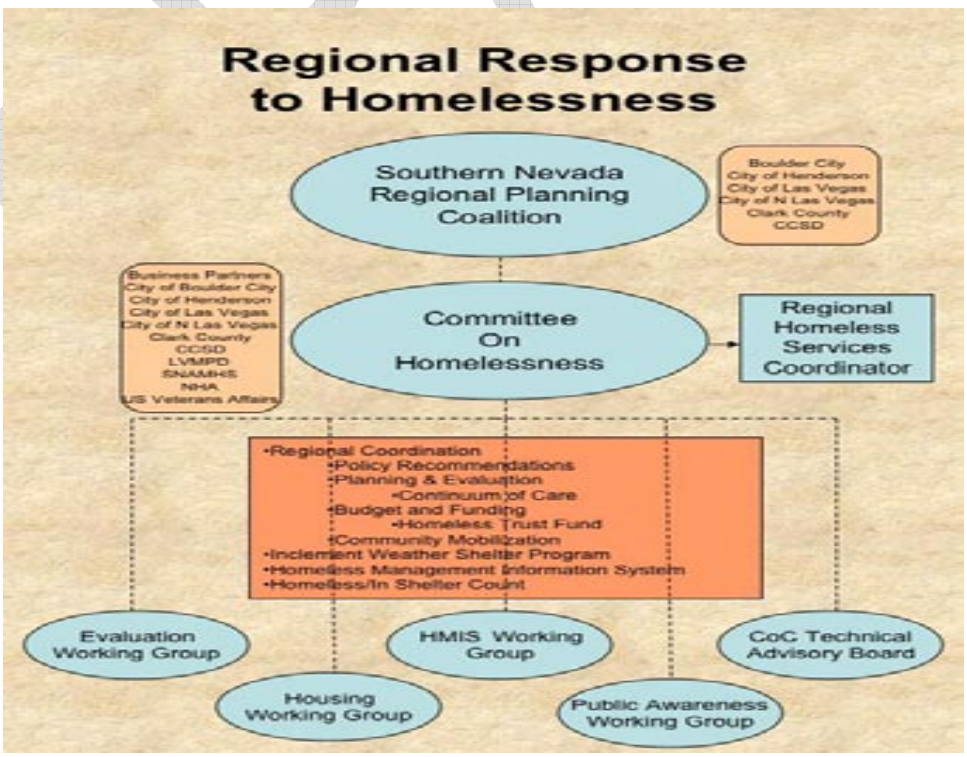
such as education, health care, the natural environment, public safety, and transportation. Recognizing that these issues transcend governmental jurisdictional boundaries, Clark County, the cities of Boulder City, Henderson, Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, and the Clark County School District entered into an interlocal agreement to establish the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition (SNRPC). The Coalition Board is made up of ten members with one to two elected officials appointed by the governing body of each entity.

Understanding the need to comprehensively address homelessness, the SNRPC convened its first committee to address a social problem. Established in 2004, the Committee on Homelessness was tasked with drafting and actualizing a regional plan. The membership of the Committee is appointed by the SNRPC and includes designees from each jurisdiction, the Nevada Homeless Alliance, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, Southern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services, United States Veterans Affairs and local business.

The Office of the Regional Homeless Services Coordinator was also created in 2004 to support the Committee on Homelessness by coordinating a regional response to homelessness through collaborative efforts among local government entities and nonprofit service providers. This response depends upon input from all, and a structure has been established to demonstrate that commitment.

The following diagram shows the structure of the regional response to homelessness led by the SNRPC and the Committee on Homelessness. Working groups that include designees from the Committee on Homelessness, subject matter experts, and local providers work together to implement policies and decisions to progress in the plan.

In 2004,



Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition's Committee on Homelessness drafted and implemented a regional plan to end homelessness. Southern Nevada along with numerous communities across the country, are attempting to address the growing numbers of homeless. Over 300 communities have implemented 10 year plans to end homelessness, and have seen dramatic reductions in the number of homeless on the streets as a result of these initiatives.

The Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition's Committee on Homelessness (CoH) has been engaged in an unprecedented regional collaboration to address homelessness between the local municipalities, public agencies and service providers. The committee is comprised of management representatives from Clark County, the cities of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson and Boulder City, and the Southern Nevada Homeless Coalition, U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, Southern Nevada Adult Mental Health, Clark County School District, and the Las Vegas Metropolitan and North Las Vegas Police Departments.

The CoH was created to address regional homeless issues and to ensure that there are adequate resources and supportive services available to assist those most in need in Southern Nevada. The Gaps Analysis conducted in Southern Nevada in 2004 provides us with locally relevant data that drives the implementation of strategies and initiatives. Illustrating the problem are data such as this: In 2003, according to the Southern Nevada Community Assessment, 31,863 Clark County households had incomes less that $15,000 per year.11 "A minimum wage worker has to work 107 hours a week to afford a two bedroom unit at the fair market rate rent, or 147 hours to afford a three bedroom unit. There are 168 hours in a seven-day week."[12]

It became apparent that those who were employed and working over 40 hours could not afford housing in Clark County, surely those individuals and families homeless and/or on the verge of homelessness would not be able to afford housing. Alternatives to permanent housing and housing stock in Clark County became a significant issue. Federally funded Section 8 housing, developer incentives, master leases and numerous other opportunities were considered. At the conclusion of this effort, it was decided that a committee be formed to address this massive issue of housing in Clark County.

The Gaps Analysis also led to the development of a regional plan to illustrate the social impacts of homelessness in this community. Lack of affordable and attainable housing, limited homeless services, non-profit capacity and few prevention services redefined this community as a community "at risk". Over 150 diverse stakeholders participated in planning and focus groups over a ten month period to provide input on gaps in services to the homeless and those at-risk of homelessness. Stakeholders included the homeless, homeless service providers, representatives from the business community, and neighborhood organizations. The gaps analysis identified over 105 gaps in service that were grouped under 10 priority areas. In June, 2005 the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition and its Committee on Homelessness approved the following ten original points, which became the Southern Nevada Regional Homeless and Housing 10 Point Plan:

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- Enhance coordination between non-profit organizations and government
- Prevent individuals and families from becoming homeless
- Provide seamless client services through effective partnerships
- Foster self-sufficiency through access to education, training and employment opportunities
- Increase the availability of stable and affordable housing
- Facilitate the transition from homelessness through intensive case management
- Ensure the availability of basic needs services
- Increase access to medical, dental and vision care services
- Improve the availability of mental health services
- Improve the availability of substance abuse treatment programs.[13]

The Southern Nevada Regional Homeless Office, funded by the SNRPC CoH, was created to streamline homeless services and to be a centralized point of contact for regional homeless issues. Highlights of programs and services coordinated by the office are as follows.

- Inclement Weather Shelter Program - a regional program supported and funded by Clark County and the cities of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Boulder City, and Henderson. The purpose of the Inclement Weather Shelter Program is to provide additional emergency shelter beds and offsite lodging during extreme summer and winter months.

- Health and Safety Interventions - a collaborative effort that consists of local government representatives, service providers and law enforcement officials to provide intensive street level intervention and services to chronic homeless individuals residing in encampments.

- Southern Nevada Regional Homeless Trust Fund - established in 2005 for the purpose of garnering corporate and other private support to fund homeless initiatives.

- Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) - used to collect data on homeless persons accessing service programs. Utilization of HMIS provides the region with a consistent means to identify service needs, barriers to accessing service, track service demands and trends with the goal of improving case management services and provides seamless service delivery for individuals and/or families at-risk or currently experiencing homelessness.

- Chronic Homeless Intervention – (AB580) - in 2005, Southern Nevada received $4 million in state funding designated for crisis intervention and intensive case management for the chronically homeless. Several local nonprofits in Southern Nevada established a consortium to provide services that include street assessments, immediate access to housing, mental health services, intensive case management, substance abuse treatment, coordinated outreach and education with

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mobile showers, and supportive services. This funding ended June 2007; however, due to its success, Clark County agreed to continue funding the services on a limited basis. The mobile showers however will be available for continued interventions weather permitting.

- Southern Nevada Continuum of Care - a regional collaboration designed to assist service providers in securing federal dollars (Housing and Urban Development) for homeless intervention, prevention and supportive service delivery. Southern Nevada was fully funded in 2004 for $5.9 M and 2005 for $5.4M respectively.

- Homeless Street And Shelter Count - mandated by HUD to count the number of homeless persons at a certain point in time with statistics referenced in the state of homeless section.

- Public Awareness Campaign - the goal is to educate the community regarding the issue of homelessness with the result being a mobilized community will around homelessness and promotion of community and corporate investment into the Homeless Trust Fund. PSAs and the website, helphopehome.org, have been developed.

- Project Homeless Connect - The annual day-long event, formerly known as Stand Down for the Homeless, helps thousands of homeless people each year receive sorely needed services. Staffed by volunteers from local governments, charities, shelters, businesses and others involved in ending and preventing homelessness, this event is coordinated by the Nevada Homeless Alliance (NHA) and co-sponsored by the SNRPC Committee on Homeless. Project Homeless Connect is free to people who are homeless. In 2007, nearly 2,500 homeless people received help with food, clothing, grooming, housing, transportation, job training, health care, mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, child care, veteran services, legal services, and employment.

The long term solution to the problem of homelessness is to provide affordable and accessible housing for all residents. The plan will define core strategies and create an Implementation Schedule that we will use to make this change a reality. These strategies and their objectives, along with the activities that support them, form our local agenda for change over the next ten years. These core strategies are based on best practices and proven methods that have decreased the incidence of homelessness in communities that have successfully implemented them across the country.

The difference between the current continuum service model and the new service model is a focus on the immediacy of housing and homelessness prevention versus the current shelter system of emergency shelter, transitional shelter, and finally permanent housing. The following diagram represents the current shelter system and the Help Hope Home plan.

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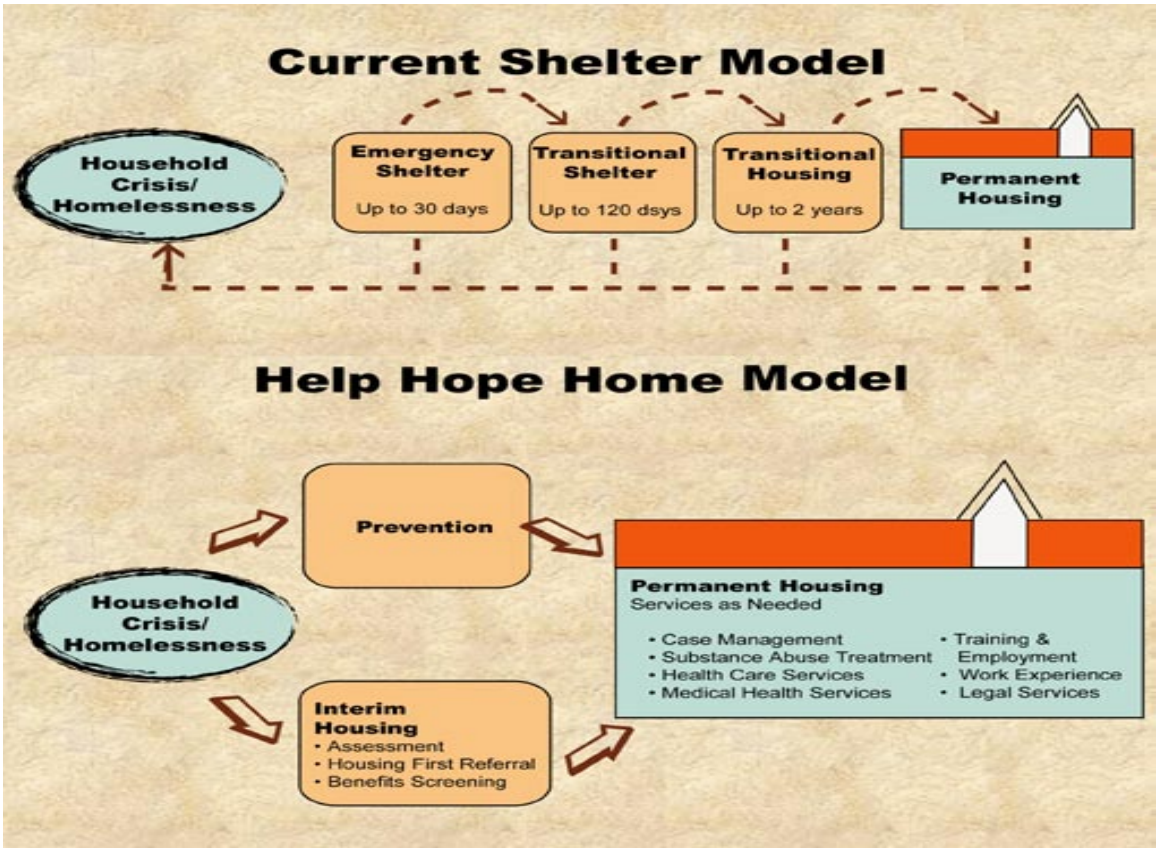

Early 2007, the SNRPC CoH facilitated a community planning session which refocused its efforts to include an updated plan to address homelessness. The regional effort will move forward, using local data supported by best practices, with a plan that outlines three key initiatives to change, including:

1. *Plan for Outcomes* - Design a roadmap for change, including goals, objectives, activities and evaluation plans for each of the key initiatives that will drive community outcomes. Build the infrastructure that will deliver services and support through increased collaboration and strategic alliances across the region.

2. *Close the Front Door* - Prevent homelessness whenever possible. Improve the availability of prevention programs, expand the types of prevention strategies, and evaluate their effectiveness in preventing homelessness. Provide people at risk for homelessness with wraparound services. Improve access to wraparound mainstream services that link clients to services and community support to keep the client in safe, affordable housing and address health and wellness issues.

3. *Open the Back Door* - Rapidly re-house people who become homeless. Expand the availability of affordable permanent housing and improve access to sustainable housing options. Implement the transition from the existing tiered shelter system to a system that focuses on providing housing.

Benefits to the community from implementing the revised regional ten year plan include:

- Significant cost savings in public systems from reduced use by homeless individuals, including hospital emergency rooms, ambulances, and EMT services
- Cost Savings in homeless service systems, including homeless shelters, acute psychiatric services, and corrections programs which result from placement in supportive housing
- Enhanced quality of life for people experiencing homelessness, as well as those who are at risk of becoming homeless

As Southern Nevada community stakeholders works collaboratively to obtain input, feedback and the data necessary to implement a plan to end homelessness, they have also taken advantage of the experience and expertise of national advocates to end homelessness by modeling Help Hope Home after other successful initiatives in other communities, including Chicago, Denver and Portland.

In addition, the CoH have evolved this community process based on the work of the National Alliance to End Homelessness (www.endhomelessness.org), an early advocate for ten-year plans. Help Hope Home, and the strategies that anchor our plan are supported by the best practice model and experiences of the Alliance, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness and 300 communities across the nation that are working to end homelessness.

Conclusion

These programs and services are just a few examples of the commitment to helping individuals and families most in need. While the city of Las Vegas and its regional partners are committed to reducing homelessness in Southern Nevada, more work needs to be done such as continuing to address the need for special programming, more coordinated service delivery and more permanent low income housing. As the Southern Nevada region moves forward in addressing homelessness, it is faced with two major challenges: (1) there are a high number of chronic homeless individuals that refuse services who mainly inhabit the parks, alleys, freeway underpasses and the homeless corridor area. Some type of specialized initiative needs development to assist these individuals who resist current homeless programming. Research from the National Alliance of Homelessness has shown people who are chronically homeless are more likely to have a serious mental health issue, drug and/or alcohol addiction and a history of repeated incarcerations and hospitalizations and more often are jailed, in shelters, and emergency rooms, which result in significant financial and social costs; (2) the greatest challenge in assisting individuals is that they don't have any income or too little income to be able to afford permanent housing. There should be more focused efforts on increasing the number of low income housing options for individuals at or below 30% area median income. Current programs that assist with housing may need to revisit policies and procedures in order to be more effective in achieving outcomes.

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Endnotes

1 The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, codified in USCA 42 Section 11302(a).

2 This definition was taken from the Notice of Funding Availability for the Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness/Federal Register, Vol. 68, Number 17/ Monday January 27, 2004, 4019. This definition is shared by the Department of Housing and Urban Development as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs.

3 Burt, Martha, Laudan Y. Aaron, and Edgar Lee, with Jesse Valente, 2001. Helping America's Homelessness: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing? Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.

4 http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/tools/tenyearplan/execsum

5 Burt, Martha, Laudan Y. Aaron, and Edgar Lee, with Jesse Valente, 2001. Helping America's Homelessness: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing? Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.

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7 http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/01/14/

8 http://www.homebaseccc.org/site_extras/NAEH.pdf

9 Shinn, M., and J. Baumohl. 1999. "Rethinking the Prevention of Homelessness." In Practical Lessons: The 1998 Symposium on Homelessness Research, edited by L.B. Fosburg and D.L. Dennis. Washington, D.C.: U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services

10 Help Hope Home website located at www.helphopehome.org

11 Southern Nevada Community Assessment located at www.uwsn.org

12 Real Estate Round Table, Social Impacts of Growth, Lied Institute for Real Estate Studies, College of Business, Department of Finance, UNLV, 2004

13 Help Hope Home website located at www.helphopehome.org

14 Southern Nevada Community Assessment located at www.uwsn.org

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Watsonville, CA 95076.

16 Southern Nevada Community Assessment p. 57 figure 15, located at www.uwsn.org

17 From www.HMIS.info, a HUD sponsored website.

18 www.beyondshelter.org

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