



City finding innovative ways to aid homeless, but it needs help

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An AJC article on a new study by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs reported, "The state's first-ever count of its homeless found that 20,000 Georgians are homeless on any one day and that 75,000 people are homeless over a year" ("State homeless count finds many families," Metro, July 18).

These results were overwhelming and a clear indication that the system is broken. So who should fix it? Whose problem is it? Is this a local, state or federal problem?

The [city of Atlanta](#) and the Atlanta Development Authority have taken an active financial role in providing solutions. After three years of trying to find an innovative incentive that would encourage developers and nonprofit groups to provide long-term permanent supportive housing, in December 2005 ADA issued a \$22 million revenue bond for the Homeless Opportunity Fund. The debt service on the bonds is paid from the rental car tax, not the city's general fund.

Atlanta is the only city in the country that has used this financing model to fund permanent supportive housing. The proceeds from the bond issuance fund various housing and capital projects such as assessment centers, public toilets and other homeless-related facilities offering social services to combat underemployment and the resulting homelessness. These funds are an integral part of United Way's "Blueprint to End Homelessness in Atlanta in Ten Years" (commissioned by Mayor Shirley Franklin).

Following the blueprint, the Homeless Opportunity Fund focuses on those who have been homeless for more than a year, providing affordable, secure and safe residences coupled with supportive services.

The blueprint's goal is to produce 1,300 housing units over the first five years. So far, in just 2 1/2 years, the opportunity fund program has funded 670 units of permanent supportive housing. The projects have included 14 multifamily projects, three assessment centers for women and children, and five public toilets. In addition, nearly 1,200 units of work force housing have been created, providing an affordable alternative for Atlanta's workers.

Partners such as the United Way, Atlanta Housing Authority, Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Fulton County and private investors have been instrumental in providing dollars for supportive services, housing vouchers and more than \$95 million in private capital for these projects.

Long-term solutions like the Homeless Opportunity Fund are essential to ending chronic homelessness. The [city of Atlanta](#) has tackled the problem head-on and made good. Given the fact that the use of the car rental tax was a one-time option, this program will soon be suspended unless new funding sources can be identified. Possible funding sources are the city's general fund, state or federal grants, or private donations from individuals, foundations or corporations.

Given the challenging state of the economy and the escalating rate of mortgage [foreclosure](#), the homeless population will continue to grow. The city and ADA have been able to find permanent supportive housing for 670 homeless individuals or families. What will become of the additional 19,330 on the streets of Georgia on any given day?

We all agree it is broken, and we are working to fix it — but we can't do it alone.

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