

REACH Advocacy Shelter Committee Annual Report 2021

It isn't easy to describe the year 2021 and the impact it has had on social support systems. Many negatives mark Rochester, NY, 2021; the COVID-19 Pandemic, health inequities, increasing opioid epidemic, civil unrest, the highest level of gun violence ever, over-utilized and understaffed social support systems, etc. The REACH Shelter Committee demonstrated its resilience and agility by continuously serving the housing deprived members of the Rochester community, no matter the barriers. In 2021, this service included four distinct initiatives:

1. Social Work support of the collaborative Hotel Emergency Shelter effort,
2. A collaborative Walking Outreach program,
3. Supporting an outdoor service provider platform, and
4. A new scattered-site emergency winter shelter program.

Starting at the end of March 2020, REACH, in collaboration with two shelters and Monroe County, assisted with staffing a hotel emergency shelter system to safely shelter chronically homeless individuals with health conditions that could lead to devastating effects from COVID-19. The hotel system ran until the end of August 2021. REACH never left the direct service work needed to appropriately accommodate people with significant mental health and/or substance use symptoms. By the end of the work, the hotel system had provided over 25,000 bed nights (one person/one room/one night) with only one known positive COVID-19 case and no COVID-19 deaths. That was the primary goal, and REACH achieved it. Some secondary goals include around 100 of our hardest-to-house community members being housed, and many guests gaining ongoing social and treatment support. It was hard work in the middle of hard times, but it proved well worth the effort.

During these turbulent times, the REACH Advocacy Shelter Committee also supported a walking outreach team made up of various community organizations. The walking team consistently brought services to people in a few of the most impoverished streets in Rochester, NY. This outreach effort went out a few times a week, almost every week, for the entire year, no matter the weather or other barriers. The outreach has reached thousands of people since its creation. The REACH Shelter Committee helped coordinate many of the basic needs items that the outreach team handed out (hygiene items, warming items, etc.). Most importantly, the REACH Shelter Committee volunteer network provided bagged lunches every outreach day. These bagged lunches significantly impacted the outreach team's ability to engage people living in extreme poverty.

This walking outreach effort turned into a stationary effort in the summer of 2021, starting on an empty city lot on a high foot traffic corner in a high-poverty area of Rochester. Various service

providers set up canopies to provide services “where people are at.” This consistent and sustained presence throughout the summer was an effective way to meet people’s needs. Again, REACH Shelter Committee volunteers stepped up to the plate and provided lunches, many basic need items and helped organize a kids' day. This direct support proved integral to successful work on the corner, reaching the hardest to reach individuals and families in our community.

Looking Ahead

With the lessons learned since March of 2020, the REACH Shelter Committee realizes a dire need for safe shelter for people living in chronic homelessness in the Rochester Community for the winter of 2021-2022. The Shelter Committee is beginning to develop a more extensive, complicated, scattered-site shelter system where every guest will have their own room. The Shelter Committee is always up to the task and is preparing three sites to shelter the homeless this winter. This work to accommodate the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in the Rochester community is a massive expansion of the typical winter emergency shelter.

2021 has been a turbulent year. The REACH Shelter Committee has used this time of crisis as a time of opportunity while supporting and instituting innovative new ways to help the most vulnerable in our community in a barrier-free and dignified manner.