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THE FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON HOMELESSNESS

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Prepared by the Senate Research Office
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Committee Focus, Creation, and Duties	1
Background	2
Committee Testimony and Findings	4
Meeting 1: September 19, 2017.....	4
Meeting 2: October 17, 2017.....	5
Meeting 3: November 7, 2017.....	7
Meeting 4: November 27, 2017.....	8
Committee Recommendations	9
Signature Page	10

COMMITTEE FOCUS, CREATION, AND DUTIES

The Senate Study Committee on Homelessness (Committee) was created by Senate Resolution 352 to understand the extent of the problem of homelessness in Georgia and to explore possible long-term solutions.

Senator Renee Unterman of the 45th chaired the Committee. The other members included Senator Michael Rhett of the 33rd, Senator Donzella James of the 35th, Commissioner Frank Berry, Ms. Becky Kurtz, Mr. Blake Fulenwider, Mr. Brian Dowd, Ms. Carmen Chubb, Ms. Barbara Reddick, Ms. Abby Cox, Interim Director Virginia Pryor, Dr. Terri Timberlake, Ms. Cassandra Price, Dr. David Holland, and Mr. George Canavaggio.

The Committee held four meetings in total; one at the Coverdell Legislative Office Building in Atlanta, Georgia on September 19, 2017 and three others at the Georgia State Capitol also located in Atlanta, Georgia on October 17, 2017, November 7, 2017, and November 27, 2017.

The Committee heard official testimony from the following: Mr. Jack Hardin, Esq., Co-Chair of the Regional Commission on Homelessness; Mr. Protip Biswas, Executive Director of the Regional Commission on Homelessness; Mr. George Chidi, Social Impact Director for Central Atlanta Progress; Mr. David Whisnant, Director of the Office of Homelessness and Special Needs Housing for the Department of Community Affairs (DCA); Ms. Debra Nesbit, Associate Legislative Director for the Association County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG); Ms. Veda Brooks, Appeals Officers for the Georgia Department of Veteran Service (GDVS); Ms. Letitia Robinson, Director of Supported Housing for the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD); Rev. David Lewicki, Co-Chair of Presbyterians for a Better Georgia; Ms. Elizabeth Appley, Esq., Public Policy Advocate with Presbyterians for a Better Georgia; Mr. Frank Mulcahy, Executive Director of the Georgia Catholic Conference; Ms. Kimberly Parker, Executive Director of Central Outreach and Advocacy Center; Mr. Jay Sanders, Assistant Commissioner of Inmate Services of the Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC); Mr. Scott Maurer, Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Community Supervision (DCS); Mr. Avery Niles, Commissioner of the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ); Mr. Eric McGhee, Grants Program Manager for the Department of Education (DOE); Ms. Cathryn Marchman, Esq., Executive Director of Partners for HOME; Mr. Tim Schrage, CEO of Perennial Properties, Inc.; Mr. Jules Stine with Park Vista Partners, LLC; Mr. Tom Andrews, President of Mercy Care; Mr. Bill McGahan, Founder of Georgia Works; and Ms. Allison Ashe, Executive Director of Covenant House Georgia.

BACKGROUND

An Overview of Georgia’s Homeless Population

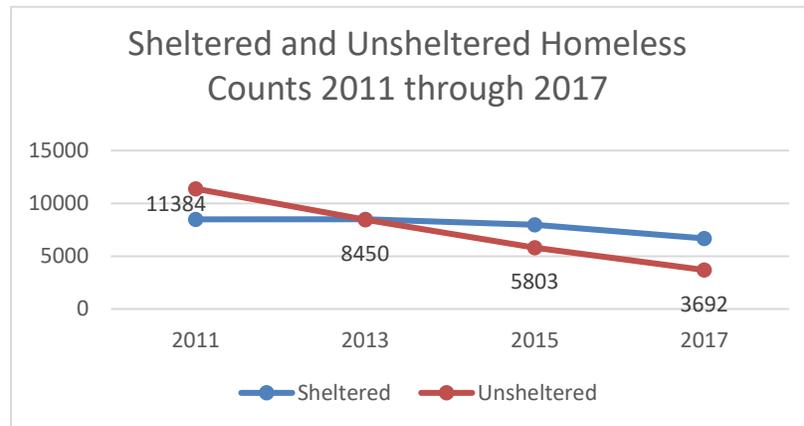
According to the Point-in-Time Count completed in January of 2017, a total of 10,373 individuals were considered literally homeless in the Georgia, representing a 25 percent decrease from 2015.¹ Of the 10,373 literally homeless, 3,692 were considered ‘unsheltered’ and 6,681 were residing in either an emergency shelter or transitional housing. Further, on the night of the count, 10 percent of the homeless population was reported as experiencing chronic homelessness.²

Table 1. Georgia’s Literally Homeless Population

Georgia’s Literally Homeless Population: Single Night (Point in Time Count)			
Housing Status	Number of Individuals per Year		
	2013	2015	2017
Unsheltered	8,450	5,803	3,692
Emergency Shelter or Transitional Housing	8,497	7,987	6,681
Total	16,947	13,790	10,373
Change from previous count (%)	-15%	-19%	-25%

Source: The Department of Community Affairs, as of November 29, 2017.

Table 2. Sheltered and Unsheltered Homeless Trends from 2011-2017



Source: The Department of Community Affairs, as of November 29, 2017.

¹ The Point-in-Time count is a HUD mandated count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people on a single night in January. Each count is planned, coordinated, and carried out locally. ‘Literally homeless’ is defined by HUD as an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (i.e. unsheltered), or an individual who resides in an emergency shelter or who is in transitional/supportive housing designated to provide temporary living arrangements (i.e. sheltered).

² ‘Chronic homelessness’ is defined by HUD as someone experiencing continuous homelessness for at least one year or at least four times in the past three years, with their total time in shelters or on the street adding up to over one year, and has a disabling condition.

With respect to Georgia’s homeless population, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) indicates that insufficient income and lack of affordable housing represent the leading causes of homelessness.³ Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness amongst women. Further, poverty serves as a unifying condition, particularly in rural areas. Relative to unaccompanied individuals, a lack of needed services coupled with mental illness or substance abuse, are significant contributing factors to homelessness.

The Committee recognizes that the underlying causes of homelessness are complex and expansive. Based on the testimony offered, the Committee primarily focused its attention towards affordable housing, mental illness and lack of services, criminal background barriers to housing, rural community housing needs, and youth homelessness.

State Solutions to Homelessness

Nationally and within the last year, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness has decreased by two percent, arguably due to an aggressive commitment by state legislatures, governors, and city councils to end homelessness.⁴ Specifically, Oregon, Seattle, Louisiana, California, and Virginia have taken more of a comprehensive approach to the problem. Examples of various state initiatives and accompanying legislation is provided below.

Oregon

During the 2017 Legislative Session, Oregon passed House Bill 2724.⁵ HB 2724 directs the Housing and Community Services Department to develop and implement the Rent Guarantee Program to provide incentives and financial assistance for unpaid rent, eviction, and property damage to landlords who rent to graduates of a qualifying tenant education program. Eligible tenants include those at or below 60 percent the Area Median Income (AMI) and those facing various housing barriers such as poor credit, criminal history, or history of eviction.

Seattle

Committed to providing affordable rental housing for low-income Seattle residents, the Seattle City Council proposed and voters approved, a ballot to increase property tax levies to finance affordable housing for low-income households.⁶ Designed to address the immediate needs of residents, the initiative provides short-term or medium rental assistance for those households with income up to 50 percent of the AMI and who are at an immediate risk of homelessness or have recently become homeless.

Louisiana

Following the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 which left countless Louisianans homeless, the Louisiana Department of Health and the Louisiana Housing Authority partnered to establish a Permanent Supportive Housing program.⁷ The program was designed to reduce homelessness particularly amongst those with disabilities and was funded by the Federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and the Community Development Block Grant. Recognizing that existing funds were insufficient to sustain the

³ DCA has indicated that insufficient income can be caused by both unemployment and low wages.

⁴ <http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-soh.pdf>

⁵ <https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2017R1/Measures/Overview/HB2724>

⁶ <http://seattle.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3034190&GUID=BC9DB7D7-7CE4-4CE0-A67C-94B38E88E5C9&FullText=1>

⁷ <https://www.kff.org/report-section/linking-medicaid-and-supportive-housing-issue-brief/>

program long-term, the state used Medicaid state funding authority to cover tenancy support services for program participants meeting the institutional level of care criterion.

California

Cognizant of the mental health needs of those rendered homeless, California passed Assembly Bill 1618 during the 2016 Legislative Session.⁸ AB 1618 establishes the No Place Like Home Program to be administered by the Department of Housing and Community Development. The program will distribute nearly \$2 billion to counties as deferred payment loans to buy, build, and preserve permanent supportive housing for those individuals who are eligible for services under the Mental Health Services Act and who are homeless, chronically homeless, or at risk of chronic homelessness.

Virginia

Virginia continues to demonstrate its commitment to homelessness prevention and homelessness solutions through significant state funding. Through the Homeless Solutions Grant, Virginia has allocated approximately \$7,000,000 for emergency shelter operations, street outreach, rapid re-housing temporary rental assistance, and associated case management activities.⁹ Additionally, through the Homeless Prevention Program, the state has allocated approximately \$4,500,000 for temporary rental assistance and case management for low-income households at imminent risk of becoming homeless.

COMMITTEE TESTIMONY AND FINDINGS

Meeting 1: September 19, 2017

The Committee's first meeting was held at the Coverdell Legislative Office Building in Atlanta, Georgia, and included a generalized overview of the state of homelessness in Georgia. The meeting included discussion of homelessness predominantly from a state agency lens. The following individuals provided testimony:

- Mr. Jack Hardin and Mr. Protip Biswas, United Way of Greater Atlanta;
- Mr. George Chidi, Central Atlanta Progress;
- Mr. David Whisnant, Department of Community Affairs (DCA);
- Ms. Debra Nesbit, Association County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG);
- Ms. Veda Brooks, Georgia Department of Veteran Service (GDVS); and
- Ms. Letitia Robinson, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD).

Mr. Hardin and Mr. Biswas led the Committee's first meeting and testified that since 2011, Atlanta's total homeless count has reduced by over 40 percent. Mr. Hardin argued that anything that can be substantially reduced, can ultimately be eliminated. Further, testimony revealed that as a result of the United Way's Regional Commission on Homelessness collaborative efforts with governmental agencies, businesses, faith based organizations, and stake holders, veteran's homelessness has dropped sixty-eight percent and unsheltered homelessness has dropped sixty-seven percent since 2011. Although homelessness is declining, its cost to the city and state remains high. Mr. Hardin testified that in the city of Atlanta alone, chronic homelessness is costing the state and local taxpayers approximately \$24 million in emergency room visits, \$37 million in in-patient hospital stays, \$1.8 million in jail stays, and \$347,000 in misdemeanor arrests. Fortunately, studies have shown that increasing supportive housing placements can decrease taxpayer costs. As such, it was recommended that the Committee focus their efforts on increasing

⁸ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB1618

⁹ <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2014/RD372/PDF>

supportive housing placements for people with mental illness available through the Georgia Housing Voucher and Bridge Funding Program.

Additionally, Mr. Hardin testified that most adults who are chronically homeless do not qualify for Medicaid. As such, he recommended that the Committee explore the implementation of a Medicaid waiver, such as a 1915(i), targeted to the chronically homeless and specifically includes housing related activities and services.

Mr. Chidi testified that currently, downtown Atlanta is disproportionately bearing the burden of homelessness. He stated that homeless individuals prefer seeking shelter in cities with an abundance of services and often travel from rural areas around the state in search of services. Consequently, Mr. Chidi argued for a statewide approach to the problem.

Mr. Whisnant testified similarly to Mr. Hardin and mentioned that one of the reasons why homelessness is declining is due to individuals being placed in permanent housing. Further, Mr. Whisnant emphasized the importance of the State Housing Trust Fund for the Homeless (SHTF). He mentioned that SHTF dollars allow agencies to be funded for critical activities *not* directly funded by HUD.

Ms. Nesbit's testimony focused on the impact of homelessness on offenders and noted that there are few if any re-entry services for low level offenders. She mentioned that lack of services is seen predominately in the rural areas of Georgia.

Ms. Brooks focused her testimony on the impact of homelessness on veterans. She testified that 2,766 out of 681,840 Georgia veterans are homeless. Ms. Brooks indicated that often times, homeless veterans are ignorant of the services available to them upon exiting the service. She argued that veterans would greatly benefit from transitional education surrounding housing and employment prior to leaving the service.

Ms. Robinson provided an overview of DBHDD's residential and supported housing initiatives, and primarily concentrated on the current status of the Georgia Housing Voucher Program (GHVP) and Bridge Funding Program.

Meeting 2: October 17, 2017

The Committee's second meeting was held at the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta, Georgia, and included a discussion which sought to identify specific populations within Georgia that are at greatest risk for homelessness. The following individuals provided testimony:

- Rev. David Lewicki and Elizabeth Appley, Esq., Presbyterians for a Better Georgia;
- Mr. Frank Mulcahy, Georgia Catholic Conference;
- Ms. Kimberly Parker, Central Outreach and Advocacy Center;
- Assistant Commissioner Jay Sanders, Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC);
- Assistant Commissioner Scott Maurer, Department of Community Supervision (DCS);
- Commissioner Avery Niles, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ); and
- Mr. Eric McGhee, Department of Education (DOE).

Rev. Lewicki and Ms. Appley echoed previous presenter testimony and noted that Georgia is suffering from a dire shortage of affordable housing in urban, rural, and suburban areas, and argued that affordable housing is a key ingredient to eradicating homelessness. They indicated that over 300,000 of Georgia

households spend at least 50 percent of their household income on housing costs. Further, approximately 21.4 percent of all Georgia households are defined as severely cost burdened. Paradoxically, housing ownership has declined while the number of rental households continues to rise. Rev. Lewicki testified that moderately priced rental housing is disappearing in Georgia. In fact, in the last ten years, rental units available for under \$800 per month have declined by 261,000, while units available for more than \$2,000 a month have soared by 1.5 million. From a metro perspective, Fulton County ranks within the top 10 cities in the country with the worst affordability trend. Moreover, of the large counties in the U.S. with the biggest affordability gap for extremely low income (ELI) renters, Gwinnett, Cobb, and DeKalb represent three of the top 10 counties.

Representing the Georgia Catholic Conference, Mr. Mulcahy testified that faith communities in the state often shoulder the burden of serving the needs of the homeless. Mr. Mulcahy indicated that between November 1 and March 31, the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception provides overnight assistance, sack lunches, and dinner to roughly 35 men. These efforts are funded by volunteer contributions.

Ms. Parker testified on behalf of Central Outreach and Advocacy Center (Central OAC) and indicated that Central OAC offers various supportive services to homeless individuals that are designed to address immediate needs. She testified that helping individuals obtain state-issued identification and birth certificates are some of the most beneficial services provided. Further, Ms. Parker testified that while Central OAC strives to provide the homeless with access to mental health treatment, additional funding is needed in light of recent increases in homeless mental illness. She mentioned that schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression are the most common mental illnesses exhibited by those whom Central OAC serves.

Commissioner Avery Niles along with Assistant Commissioners Jay Sanders and Scott Maurer testified jointly and on behalf of the state's criminal justice agencies. Each presenter indicated that substance abuse often serves as the precursor to incarceration, and incarceration serves as a substantial risk factor for homelessness. Mr. Maurer testified that the DCS participates in the ReEntry Partnership Housing Program along with GDC and DCA. Funded by state dollars, approved housing providers are paid to provide housing room and board for eligible placements. Housing providers serving participants with mental illnesses are compensated at a higher rate and are equipped to provide for recommended treatment. Mr. Maurer testified that under the guidance of a Community Supervision Officer, participants are able to obtain a license, find a job, and find a home. Like other presenters, he indicated that the biggest challenge DCS faces is lacking of housing, often due to the offender's criminal background.

Assistant Commissioner Sanders and Commissioner Niles indicated that in addition to lack of housing, their agencies face challenges with lack of behavioral services. Commissioner Niles estimated that roughly half of the juveniles housed in his Department battle with substance abuse. The Commissioner suggested that focus be placed on local resources and that funding continue.

Mr. McGhee testified on behalf of DOE and indicated that Georgia has a growing student homelessness problem. In fact, the number of reported homeless students in the state has increased every year since 2011. As of 2016, 39,755 students were identified as homelessness in the state, with the majority of those students being in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Mr. McGhee emphasized that while student homelessness is rising, federal award money used to support students experiencing homelessness has decreased by 22 percent.

Meeting 3: November 7, 2017

The Committee's third meeting was held at the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta, Georgia, and included discussion primarily focused on the challenges housing providers face relative to homelessness. The following individuals provided testimony:

- Ms. Cathryn Marchman, Esq., Partners for HOME, Inc.;
- Mr. Tim Schrager, Open Doors;
- Mr. Jules Stine, Park Vista Partners, LLC;
- Mr. Tom Andrews, Mercy Care;
- Mr. Bill McGahan, Georgia Works; and
- Ms. Allison Ashe, Covenant House Georgia.

Ms. Marchman testified on behalf of Partners for HOME, a nonprofit organization charged with the task of managing the Atlanta Continuum of Care (CoC) for homeless services.¹⁰ Ms. Marchman indicated that in the past, the way in which homeless individuals accessed services was inefficient. With goals to end veteran homelessness by 2017, chronic homelessness by 2019, and youth and family homelessness by 2020, Partners for Home has orchestrated a new approach that focuses on disrupting the old system, identifying the right housing intervention solution by population, realigning and leveraging financial resources, and viewing the local homeless response as a coordinated system of homeless assistance options. Additionally, Ms. Marchman testified that as of this year, the total number of chronically homeless people in Atlanta has reduced by 75 percent and the total number of unsheltered homeless individuals has reduced by 61 percent. Because of such success, the city recently approved a homeless opportunity bond up to \$25 million to be matched dollar for dollar by the private sector, resulting in a total of \$50 million. Like other presenters, she indicated that funding must continue in order to meet long-term needs.

Mr. Schrager testified on behalf of Open Doors, a partnership between the Atlanta Real Estate Collaborative and Enterprise Community Partners which connects property owners with screened tenants who have the support of service providers. When asked what the biggest barrier to housing was, Mr. Schrager responded that a person's criminal background served as the greatest threat to placement. He mentioned that landlords are afraid of being sued for overlooking someone's criminal past and providing an exception.

Mr. Stine testified on behalf of Park Vista Partners, LLC and from the prospective of a for-profit landlord. He advocated for a trusting relationship with quality supportive housing case management providers.

Mr. Andrews testified on behalf of Mercy Care. Mercy Care is local nonprofit that provides healthcare to the homeless, uninsured, and ELI individuals in Fulton and DeKalb County. Mr. Andrews stated there is a severe lack of funding for behavioral health services and the demand for the services are great. As of FY 2017, 89 percent of Mercy Care's behavioral health visits were homeless patients.

Mr. McGahan testified on behalf of Georgia Works. Georgia Works is privately funded and houses chronically homeless men for up to one year while they participate in transitional work. Additionally, the men receive case management, relapse prevention, adult education and computer skills, life skills training, financial management training, and career developing training over the course of their stay. Mr. McGahan

¹⁰ Atlanta's CoC was created in 2013 by Mayor Kasim Reed and is a local collaborative that coordinates housing, services, and funding for homeless families and individuals. It consists of the Governing Council, CoC membership, and Partners for Home, Inc.

indicated that a total of 360 participants have graduated from the program, resulting in thousands of dollars in cost savings to both the city and state.

Ms. Ashe briefly testified on behalf of Covenant House Georgia. Covenant House Georgia provides shelter and other supportive services to homeless youth in Atlanta. Ms. Ashe indicated that there are approximately 3,300 homeless youth on the street in a typical summer month in metro Atlanta, with over 54 percent of them reporting past involvement with the criminal justice system. Further, Ms. Ashe stated that approximately 42 percent of their youth have reported a physical disability, mental health illness, or substance abuse problem. The cost to serve a youth with a mental health need residing at the shelter, is roughly \$1,250 per month.

Meeting 4: November 27, 2017

The Committee met for a fourth, and final time, at the Georgia State Capitol to discuss its findings and recommendations based on the testimony heard at previous meetings.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the testimony and findings previously provided, the Committee makes the following recommendations:

- 1) The Committee recommends that the Department of Community Health explore opportunities to leverage state funds by accessing federal Medicaid funds to support individuals who are currently or at risk of homelessness.
- 2) The Committee recommends an increase in state funding to the State Housing Trust Fund for the Homelessness (SHTF) in order to enable DCA to expand existing homelessness programs as well as to explore additional options and opportunities to maximize federal funds to address homelessness in Georgia.
- 3) The Committee recommends allocating funding to support DCA's expansion of the Section 811 Project Rental Assistance Demonstration Program and mixed income properties in high density counties.
- 4) The Committee recommends increasing funding for the availability of supported housing placements for Georgia Housing Voucher Program participants.
- 5) The Committee recommends allocating funding for DBHDD to expand the Georgia Housing Voucher and Bridge Program to include non-settlement criteria individuals with a substance use diagnosis.
- 6) The Committee recommends allocating funding to DBHDD for PATH, ACT, CST, and ICM services to support the provision of replacement state-issued identification for enrolled individuals transitioning from correctional facilities.
- 7) The Committee recommends the creation of a statewide public-private partnership to serve as a clearinghouse of best practices, information, and resources that supports developing and sustaining local re-entry case planning collaboratives in every county. Such re-entry collaboratives should be designed to engage law enforcement, community service boards, legal services, the faith community, local non-profit organizations, and behavioral health providers to provide case planning for individuals exiting correctional facilities, with the goal of ending the expensive and ineffective cycle of individuals being admitted to the hospital, incarcerated, and released to homelessness.
- 8) The Committee recommends increasing state funding for private and/or nonprofit homeless shelters to provide increased educational and psychosocial supports for homeless youth.
- 9) The Committee appreciates the working relationship with the Georgia Apartment Association and would like to pursue new options of best practices that have worked successfully in other states. While the apartment rentals in the Metro Atlanta area are in short supply and higher costs, the Committee feels that vouchers are still a realistic option and will aid in solving the issue of adequate temporary housing for the homeless. Further, the Committee recommends that the state continue this ongoing relationship in a dedicated manner to continue to diminish homelessness in Georgia.

Respectfully Submitted,

THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON HOMELESSNESS

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Renee Unterman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

**Senator Renee Unterman, Chair
District 45**