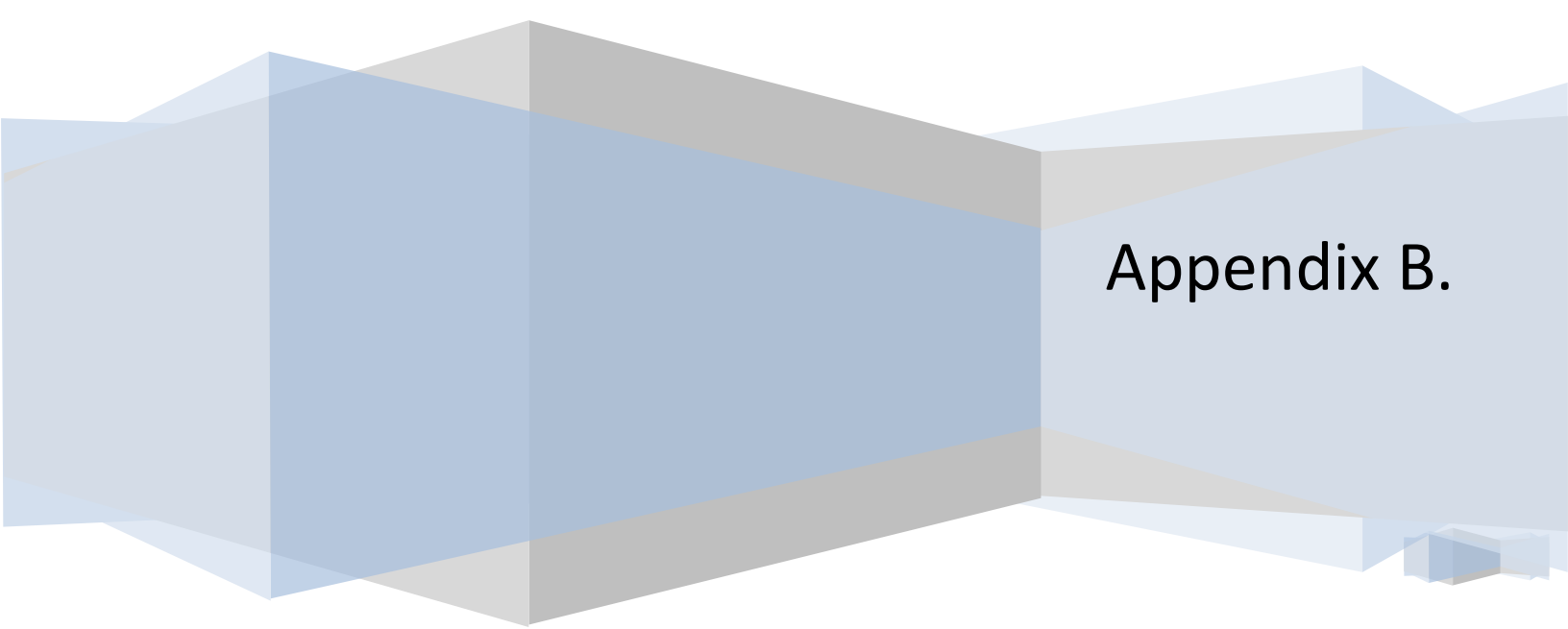


Texoma Council of Governments

2011-2015 Texoma Needs Assessment

A Study of Unmet Needs for Low-Income
Texomans who Seek Self-Sufficiency



Appendix B.

4. APPENDIX B. KEY INFORMANT PROFILES

Cooke County

Abigail's Arms is the only non-profit organization providing crime assistance in Cooke County. They serve any crime victim, not matter what their age, race, or sex. The services they provide include:

- 1) The Batterers Intervention Program, in which they work with perpetrators themselves. The shelter project manager said that the vast majority of perpetrator participants have a history of substance abuse. Before perpetrators can enroll in the Batterers Intervention Program, they cannot be using drugs and must go through treatment programs such as Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous. If these perpetrators are on probation, then they receive random drug testing. These are the only options for perpetrators with substance abuse problems in the county.
- 2) They recently formed a sexual assault response team. They currently take victims to Denton for crime assistance services, including forensic interviews.
- 3) Counseling for crime victims in the form of a part-time therapist, a victim's rights therapist, and a liaison for judicial services.
- 4) They can assist crime victims by sending them a letter verifying that the client is in a domestic violence situation and need housing, then those clients can get crime victims compensation.

Abigail's Arms works with the Crisis Center in Sherman, using it as an emergency shelter if they have a need for it. The Sherman Crisis Center shelter is their first choice because they receive the Regional Assistance Victims grant they apply jointly for with Fannin and Grayson Counties. They also use space from shelters in Denton, Ardmore, and Fort Worth.



Cooke County United Way is the Cooke County branch of United Way, located in Gainesville. They support area agencies and run outreach events. They help fund 19 agencies. They have Impact Areas, such as Help Children and Youth Succeed. This is how they select agencies to fund. They adhere to the traditional method of funding, where United Way funds agencies rather than programs within agencies.

Eligibility criteria for agencies seeking funding from United Way include that the agency must provide health and human services. It must be a registered non-profit. Physical location of the agency does not matter as long as it provides a service in Cooke County. They must have a Board of directors. It must not fund anything political, for animals, religion, or municipal services such as volunteer fire departments.

The agency comes to United Way with an application, including the amount of money it is requesting. United Way will use their general account to support that agency's salaries, programs, services, and supplies. For example, if VISTO was one of Cooke County United Way's supported agencies, it would get a certain amount of dollars. That agency can use the money they receive how they want to. Cooke County United Way does not require agencies to specify how they will use that money.

United Way does fund agencies outside of Cooke County, such as Red Cross, Meals on Wheels, and the Substance Abuse Council. They may be located in Sherman and Denison, but they still serve citizens in Cooke County. For example, these agencies come to schools in Cooke County, and they also work with the county commissioner. They also support the Girl Scouts, which come from Fort Worth, as well as other agencies from Denton. The physical location of service providers is not a barrier to United Way funding. Another example is Home Hospice. Home Hospice is a tri-county hospice management that is run out of Sherman. Their grants cover Cooke, Fannin, and Grayson Counties. They run a hospice offer in Cooke County.



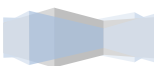
In addition to the service providers mentioned above, Cooke County United Way also supports ABBA, Habitat for Humanity, and Stanford House. Those agencies, along with the 19 United Way agencies, are the biggest in Cooke County.

Cooke County United Way works with TCOG's Texoma 211 program to put together a resource book for Cooke County. This resource book includes services from the tri-county area as well as outside services from Denton and Dallas/Fort-Worth.

Volunteers in Service to Others (VISTO) operates and maintains Cooke County's largest emergency food bank. It is a community action agency that provides emergency aid for clients' rent, utilities, transportation, prescription medicine, and dental care.¹ According to the executive director, VISTO was created to be the agency of last resort, but now they have turned into the agency of first response. They do not have a national branch. They collect data about their clients themselves, which they describe as a long process. There are 3 part-time workers at VISTO, working from 8AM to 12PM. They also spend their days raising awareness and fundraising. VISTO relies on monetary donations rather than federal money. In 2009 alone, VISTO assisted 10231 clients.

A unique program called Pathways is jointly run by VISTO and Abigail's Arms. It is a comprehensive program designed to bring victims out of crime and the cycle of poverty they are in. Clients attend workshops and meet with a life coach twice a month. Both clients from Abigail's Arms and VISTO attend Pathways. Abigail's described VISTO as being designed to avoid church-hopping and agency-hopping, which means clients going to different places to take advantage of different benefits. VISTO was created as a hub so churches did not have to provide services to clients, and point to VISTO saying, "That is VISTO's job." The executive director said that VISTO has a staff, but their resources are limited. They are the main resource for clients because they pay for rent, gas, bus tickets, food, and emergency shelter. VISTO goes through TCOG for utility assistance. VISTO also refers numerous clients back to Abigail's Arms.

¹ VISTO website, <http://www.vistohelps.com/>



Nearly 50% of their clients also are served by VISTO. VISTO is on Abigail's Arms confidentiality release list automatically, because they know that they might have to refer clients to VISTO.

Fannin County

Project United is a 501(c)(3) non-profit Community Development Corporation that aims to provide public services to low-income individuals and families. Its approach is to provide these services in such a way that encourages self-sufficiency and self-respect for clients, with the ultimate goal of economic growth and stability in the greater community.² Project United is an outreach ministry of a church, but does not proselytize to the youth served. Project United operates in Honey Grove because the president, himself, grew up there as a child and had a special connection to the Honey Grove community in his desire to improve it. They serve youth and their families in Honey Grove Ladonia and rural parts of eastern Fannin County. There were two people interviewed: the president of Project United and a volunteer of Project United.

Services that affect client attitudes and thinking are vital to Project United's service provision. Project United promotes group activities for children. These activities foster positive thinking and communication skills. During a presentation to all children attending the community center's daily activities, the president urged the students to think about their ability to control their own actions. The president used games and slogans in order to draw the children into their activity. There are other services that the Project United provides that focus on positive thinking and communication skills. These services include various mentoring program for adults and children.

A major aspect of the Project United branch in Honey Grove is the creation of the community center. The respondent bought and renovated the old Honey Grove High School. Now, Project United uses the community center as the base for its youth activities. The respondent said that the community center provides services for youth and a centralized location where children

² <http://www.projectunited.org/aboutus.html>



develop positive thinking and communication skills. And, as a result, the community center holds great importance for the community.

Volunteers play a major role in Project United. In Honey Grove, there are currently 20 volunteers and the organization is in the process of training 50 volunteers. The hope is to gain as many volunteers as students in order to have a one-on-one mentoring system, but the president admitted that this is a difficult task. Because the president is based out of Dallas, he knows many people in Dallas who want to volunteer at the community center in Honey Grove. However, he does not allow this to happen because he wants the community in Honey Grove to help itself.

Training volunteers involves educating them about topics such as mentoring and youth counseling. The president said that all volunteers should exert a positive influence on children. He instructs the volunteers on how to become positive role models and then charges those volunteers with mentoring children.

Additional volunteer also include teachers from Honey Grove schools, as the teachers come to spend extra time with their students during the after-school program.

Grayson County

Sherman Housing Authority is a public housing authority in Sherman, Grayson County. According to the website, its mission is to “ensure safe, decent, and affordable housing; create opportunities for residents' self-sufficiency and economic independence; and assure fiscal integrity by all program participants.” Eligibility for housing is based on client income categories. If clients do not have a regular source of income, then they must report their monthly income to the Sherman Housing Authority every month. Monthly income can include social security income, disability payments, and family contributions. Clients are rejected from receiving public housing, not because they are unemployed or unable to pay their bills, but because they have destroyed property or broken previous lease agreements. In the past, the



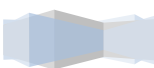
executive director took a more relaxed approach to client applications, but realized that by loosening the guidelines the Sherman Housing Authority was no longer providing safe housing to clients. Furthermore, many clients exploited the fact that receiving public housing is a privilege and not an entitlement. In recent years, the executive director admitted that she has tightened the guidelines for public housing application acceptance to address this issue.

United Way of Grayson County is a branch of United Way that is based in Sherman, Grayson County. According to its website, <http://unitedwaygrayson.org> , “United Way of Grayson County helps people overcome many of life's challenges while focusing on barriers to succeed. While the definition of success can vary from one to the other, for many, it simply means finding a job, affordable child care for low-income parents, literacy programs for under-educated adults, support and quality care for the disabled and senior citizens of our communities, and the list goes on. United Way goes beyond addressing the immediate crisis or problems facing Grayson County by taking action to improve systems of care. They diligently work with many partners' human service agencies, governments, supports, businesses, and labor to find the root causes of problems and situations that harm our community.”

While United Way of Grayson County does not provide services directly to clients, it can be considered a service provider as it provides services to other service providers in Grayson County, mostly through funding and organizational support. It also connects organizations and clients to resources such as information, referrals and funding.

Tri-County

TAPS Public Transit is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization providing rural public transportation primarily to Grayson, Fannin and Cooke Counties. TAPS was created by an effort led by the Texoma Council of Governments (TCOG) Area Agency on Aging in order to consolidate funds and resources to achieve better service. Since 1986, TAPS has expanded to a system of more than 60 buses and vans providing over 360,000 trips per year in six counties. TAPS can provide the following services to their riders in addition to normally fared rides:



1) Subsidized rides for employment or medical purposes, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding for the region, and assistance for other organizations that TAPS is directly contracted out to, such as the Wise Regional Hospital.

2) Employees took the initiative to create Peterbuilt and Trailblazer Plant bus routes. Employees have to buy a monthly pass for \$80 a month, but, with that pass, they can ride to work every day from residence to workplace. TAPS also runs a Texas Express service that goes to Plano daily.

3) TAPS tells all schedulers to track the reasons why riders are on the bus. Schedulers are usually pretty good at tracking ride reasons. In all counties, the average rate for employment-subsidized rides was 30% and growing. With regard to the average rate of ridership in all counties, employment was the reason for 30% of all rides and that number is increasing. Out of all subsidized rides, employment ridership has had the largest percentage increase in growth. Overall, the largest portion of subsidized rides is due to medical reasons. Clients include an array of people since Medicaid serves all kinds of clients. However, the majority of medical trip clients were elderly and disabled.

4) If clients call to schedule a ride with TAPS, but have no money, TAPS will often referred the client to CDBG programs because in some cases a client's fare can be covered by this program. TAPS works with SNAP centers and area housing authorities in urban and rural areas.

The Texoma Council of Governments (TCOG) is a voluntary organization of local governmental organizations in Cooke, Grayson, and Fannin Counties. It was created under the authority of Chapter 391 of the Texas Local Government Code. The goals of TCOG are to develop better cooperation and reduce service duplication amongst area organizations. TCOG is organized into four departments: Administration & Finance, Area Agency on Aging of Texoma, Government Services, and Client Services.



TCOG Elder Rights is part of the Area Agency on Aging. The program provides Elder Rights Benefits Counselors located in each of the three counties. They assist elderly persons 60 years of age or older with understanding public benefits, including awareness of benefits, determination of eligibility, filling out applications, and advocacy. They also serve disabled persons receiving Medicare and provide counseling to those less than 60 years of age.

The TCOG Elder Rights benefits counselors serve Grayson, Fannin and Cooke Counties. The respondent interviewed at TCOG Elder Rights was the Grayson County benefits counselor.

TCOG Elder Rights does not provide funding to elderly clients in need of assistance. Rather, it provides counseling, information and advice to clients. On its website, the program lists several aspects of public assistance which it advises clients on: advocacy with landlords, advocacy at administrative hearings for denied benefits consultation, advocacy with creditors, food stamps, advanced directives, legal referrals to pro-bono/reduced-fee legal program, long-term care insurance, Medicaid, Medicare, Medigap insurance, public housing, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, utility assistance, and veterans' benefits.

TCOG Elder Rights helps elderly clients with Medicaid/Medicare problems, applications and prescription drug plans. The organization refers people in need of legal guidance and helps with medical bills and budgeting. The TCOG Elder Rights counselors send charity write-off letters, telling companies and hospitals that the client in question cannot afford their daily expenses and thus cannot pay their bills.

Section 8 Rent Assistance Program at TCOG provides rental assistance payments to private landlords in Grayson and Fannin Counties. Subsidies are available for one bedroom to four bedroom homes. Eligible participants are able to rent safe housing and pay no more than 40% of their income. Additionally, the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Homeownership Program helps families achieve the American Dream of homeownership.



Family Self-Sufficiency is part of the TCOG Client Services department. The goal of the Family Self-Sufficiency program is to enable clients to achieve financial self-sufficiency. Clients are eligible if they are residents in the TCOG Section 8 housing program. Their services include training on homemaking, parenting skills and money management; home ownership counseling; and referrals for transportation, job training, child care, education, and substance abuse treatment.

The TCOG Section 8 Rent Assistance Program provides rent assistance payments to private landlords and subsidies are available for one to four bedroom homes. Eligible participants are able to pay no more than 40% of their income for safe rent housing. Additionally, the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Homeownership Program helps families achieve the American Dream of homeownership.

The TCOG Section 8 program has contracts with private landlords and holds the landlords accountable for tenant suitability. Clients have flexibility as to where they decide to rent housing and only the agency, HUD and the landlord know that the client receives Section 8 assistance. This helps to erase stigma associated with government assistance and allows clients the flexibility of being able to move anywhere they want, as long as the landlord agrees.

Section 8 does impose financial limits on clients. Before, clients were given a voucher from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and were told they could rent anywhere they wanted. However, as a result, people overextended themselves financially and because they did not know how to budget, they were unable to afford their housing. Clients did not consider how they would pay for the difference in rent, plus utilities. Consequently, there were constant terminations because clients could not pay their part of rent and utilities. Now, HUD has renamed this program to the Housing Choice Voucher program. In addition, HUD implemented a “40%” policy, meaning that Section 8 program managers have the right to deny any residence to clients if those clients are paying more than 40% of their adjusted monthly



income for rent. This policy is beneficial in the long-run because there are fewer client contract terminations. Not to mention, clients budget their finances more responsibly.

TCOG Section 8 administers assistance in Grayson and Fannin Counties. The program recently added 28 new units, with a total of 617 housing units. Gainesville Housing Authority administers Section 8 in Cooke County.

TCOG Section 8 oversees two subprograms called Family Unification and Mainstream. Both are voluntary programs that are in high demand. Family Unification works with CPS and it is a special program that allows Section 8 to place clients in housing immediately with the goal of keeping families intact. One of most integral parts of the program is permanent housing. CPS will not reunite a family if there permanent housing is unavailable. Beginning around 15 years ago, vouchers could be used towards family unification. This program is important because if families are not reunited, then other people would have to take the children in. The creation of Family Unification helped to stabilize the entire Section 8 program.

The Mainstream program works with MHMR to help the disabled. At least 40% of the programs participants are disabled and elderly, so there is a huge demand for Mainstream.

TCOG Energy Assistance Program provides low-income families with utility payment assistance and other services in order to transition families out of poverty and off of public assistance. Services include the co-payment of utilities for a specific period of time and energy reduction education, as well as a case management program that provides assistance with the cost of expenses such as education, transportation, and child care.

TCOG Energy Assistance is a program within the Client Services department at TCOG. The Energy Assistance Program provides low-income families with utility payment assistance and other services in order to transition families out of poverty and off public assistance. Services include the co-payment of utilities for a specific period of time and energy reduction education,



as well as a case management program that provides assistance with expenses such as education, transportation, and child care.

In 2009, TCOG Energy Assistance served 1,400 families in Cooke, Grayson and Fannin Counties. Over 60% of the assistance was distributed to families within Grayson County.

In terms of services, TCOG Energy Assistance will pay one monthly utility bill each calendar year and sometimes two monthly bills. Currently, the maximum TCOG Energy Assistance will pay is up to four bills per calendar year.

Energy companies such as TXU, Atmos and Reliant donate private funds to TCOG Energy Assistance. They can help pay one bill per calendar year or up to \$300. This is outside of the usual four bills per year paid by Energy Assistance. Energy Assistance does not know how much companies will contribute year to year. The program has a contract with these companies and must report which clients the program pays bills for and the amount of the bills paid.

Clients that come to TCOG Energy Assistance participate in a case management process that works to identify families who qualify for the program in terms of income and household makeup. The program's primary goal is to teach clients how to save money on energy. Part of the case management model that TCOG Energy Assistance has adopted includes educating its clients on basic household budgeting. Clients fill out a form detailing their household budget and, then, case managers show clients what percentage that their utility bills is taking away from income. Some families find out that they are spending more than 30% of their monthly income on utilities. The case management model allows case managers to work differently with each unique household, as well as elderly households. Working families need to make sure that they keep coming back to case management and participate in the co-pay program. Elderly households need to apply for food stamps and other eligible programs. Some elderly people do not take advantage of these assistance services because they are embarrassed that they receive assistance or because they think that the benefits may not be worth the hassle.



TCOG Energy Assistance only gives energy usage advice if that particular family has high energy usage. People with a fixed income can ask TCOG Energy Assistance to examine their 12-month consumption rate. Overall, TCOG Energy Assistance gives practical advice in the form of handouts from energy company websites.

TCOG Energy Assistance can replace client-owned appliances in a home, but it cannot replace appliances in rented homes. Depending on the age of the home and the types of heating and cooling units, TCOG Weatherization can replace assessed units if they do not meet efficiency standards. Weatherization will pay up to \$5,000 per household.

The other major service provided by TCOG Energy Assistance is the Tuition Payment Program, which is funded by the Community Service Block Grant (CSBG). Clients who need job certification or further education can receive assistance if their household income level makes them eligible. Clients must get accepted to the appropriate school and bring their budget to TCOG Energy Assistance. This Tuition Payment Program pays tuition directly to the school; it is not a reimbursement. Occasionally, the client's cost of books is reimbursed.

TCOG Family Self Sufficiency Program (FSS) is part of the HUD Section 8 Rent Assistance Program, which is part of the Client Services department at TCOG. The goal of the FSS program is to enable clients to achieve financial self-sufficiency. Clients are eligible for this program if they are clients of the TCOG Section 8 housing program. FSS services include training on homemaking, parenting skills and money management; home ownership counseling; and referrals for transportation, job training, child care, education, and substance abuse treatment.

The FSS coordinator meets with clients to establish self-sufficiency goals for families. Together, they discuss educational opportunities and job training. Factors that typically work against self-sufficiency are lack of transportation, job training, and motivation. They establish an A to B plan



in order to achieve self-sufficiency. If, after a certain period of time, the families do not appear to be making improvements, they are removed from the FSS program.

As mentioned previously, TCOG FSS donates school supplies to children. School supplies are funded through the FSS Program to encourage children and adults. The first day of school is often disheartening for children because they cannot afford school supplies. The donated supplies motivate children to work harder in school and encourage parents since their children are receiving help. However, this is a major expense since school supplies typically cost between \$35-85 per child. Supplies are donated by partner organizations within the community. One year, insurance companies competed to see who could raise the most school supplies. The community helps provide school supplies. Other donation programs include an annual winter coat drive and a house item and furniture program geared to help families that are in the home buyer program. The Hallmark program teaches children and parents how to give gifts inexpensively and provides cards and gift donations.

Finally, the cash assistance program is sponsored by HUD. In this program, the additional earned income of the family is increased by 30% every time the family's income increases. The family is then given access to this escrow account after graduation. One exception to this is if the family is in the home buyer program, which allows the family to use 50% of this money before graduation in order to prepare for buying a home.

The Texas Homeless Network is a non-profit 501(c)3 membership-based organization that is partially funded through the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and the Texas Department of State Health Services. The Texas Homeless Network provides training and technical assistance to help service providers and communities better serve the homeless populations of Texas, with an end goal of preventing homelessness. The Texoma Homeless Coalition is the Texoma representative of Texas Homeless Network. A coalition is formed by an alliance of service providers working to address homelessness in their community.



The Texoma Homeless Coalition is not a service provider because it does not provide direct services to clients. However, it is a key informant because the Coalition representative is very familiar with the issue of homelessness within the region. The respondent interviewed was the Texoma representative for the Texas Homeless Network, with the role of Americorps VISTA. The Texas Homeless Coalition focuses on rural homelessness, placing VISTAs in other rural cities such as Laredo, Odessa and Huntsville. The goal of Americorps VISTA is to raise awareness about rural homelessness and strengthen agency funding for the Balance of State Continuum of Care grant. Texas Homeless Network VISTAs build coalitions throughout rural areas of Texas to facilitate collaboration with service providers and, overall, meet the needs of the rural homeless.

The Texoma Homeless Coalition VISTA respondent was “housed” with the North Texas Youth Connection. His term started August 2009 and lasted until August 2010. The VISTA program for the Homeless Coalition lasts 3 years and its purpose is capacity-building. At the end of the 3 years, the VISTAs will leave, so that the staff already based in Texoma will be able to run the Coalition on their own. The goal of the VISTA program is to connect Texas coalitions with grant funding. The Texoma Homeless Coalition’s meetings are an example of inter-agency collaboration, bringing agencies to work together and prioritize the needs of the community as a whole rather than the needs of a particular agency. The Texoma Homeless Coalition covers Cooke, Fannin, Grayson, Lamar, Red River, and Delta Counties.

One of the services the Texoma Homeless Coalition provides is a count of homelessness in the area. A “point in time” count was done by the Texas Homeless Network on January 28, 2010 in order to get an estimate of the number and needs of homeless individuals in rural areas. The organization did a sheltered and unsheltered count. The sheltered count of homeless individuals was higher because there are typically few “street homeless” in rural areas. The point in time count netted 92 surveys, including reports from bigger shelters. Only 3 unsheltered homeless individuals were counted on January 28 due to inclement weather. Out of the 6 counties, only 3 counties participated. There were 90 sheltered homeless individuals



counted. Of these homeless respondents, 20% came from outside of the service area. Therefore, 80% of homeless respondents serviced were from the area. Children were not required to be counted, but, at the time of the count, there were 6 homeless children sheltered at the North Texas Youth Connection.

The other services provided include the Texoma Homeless Coalition meetings. The Coalition invites area service providers to discuss needs and gaps in services for the homeless. The Coalition also connects individuals and agencies to other agencies that are interested in addressing homelessness. Heaven's Helper is an organization that is a Coalition success story. Heaven's Helper provides substance abuse rehabilitation and transitional housing for women. The Heaven's Helper director came to the Coalition's meeting in December of 2009 and asked for help to start a shelter. The director already had a house available and wanted to know what she could do to help. She was put in contact with the executive directors of existing shelters. In February of 2010, The Texoma Homeless Coalition had 18 organizations represented at its meeting.

Workforce Solutions Texoma provides employment-related services to businesses, job seekers, and youth in Cooke, Fannin and Grayson Counties. Through the Business Services Unit, businesses receive services to find, train, and keep workers. Job seekers receive assistance to find employment or employment-related training at the local Workforce Centers located in each of the three counties. Youth can take advantage of a variety of services that encourage them to stay in high school, complete their GED, attend employment-related training, and find employment at their local Workforce Center.

The Child Care Assistance Program at Workforce Solutions Texoma provides child care for eligible clients. For 90% of low-income families that participate, the main barrier to vocational training or employment is child care cost. Many parents do not work, because they felt as though they work just to pay the cost of child care. In which case, parents would rather stay home. Parents may spend up to 30-40% of their budget on child care. The Child Care Assistance



Program works with parents going to school or with a job to provide child care for them. Ultimately, education and jobs are key aspects necessary for gaining self-sufficiency. Parents do pay part of child care costs, because it is a cost share program. However, for most clients, the Child Care Assistance program does not cover the majority of child care costs for families.

