



# THE LONG ROAD HOME

*Denver is working to end homelessness, and DU has signed on to help.*

By Brenda Gillen  
Photography by Marc Piscotty

**WHEN LISA WARE**, 51, leaves the volunteer agency where she works each day, she heads to a secret garden near downtown Denver. It's home to flowers, tomatoes, zucchini, gourds, pumpkins—and to Ware. She feels lucky to have a beautiful place to lay her head, hidden and somewhat protected.

After classes at Metropolitan State College of Denver, Ginger Wiggins, 29, picks up her 2-year-old daughter, Angelique, from daycare and goes home to one of the Denver Housing Authority's newest apartment buildings, where her rent is capped at \$72 per month. For two months in 2005, Wiggins was pregnant and homeless, living with a friend and then her mother-in-law.



*The two months that she was pregnant and homeless was the scariest time in her life, says Ginger Wiggins (left). She and her daughter, Angelique, now can kick off their shoes in their own home. Denver's initiative to end homelessness has resulted in nearly 800 new housing units, but thousands of Denverites remain homeless. Many of those living in shelters tie their shoes to their bunk so they won't be stolen (right).*

**NEARLY 11,000 HOMELESS PEOPLE** live in metropolitan Denver, according to a January 2007 point-in-time census conducted by the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI). Like Ware and Wiggins, every person has his or her own story. Statistics give some clues: Nearly one-third were newly homeless and 60 percent were in households with children. Only about 8 percent were chronically homeless.

Many in Denver—including Mayor John Hickenlooper—want to reduce that number to somewhere around zero. Grandiose as the idea may be, it's one that 300 U.S. cities are trying.

The national effort, aimed primarily at chronic homelessness, began in 1987 when Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act and established the Interagency Council on Homelessness. Today, Philip Mangano, President Bush's "homeless czar," heads the council. Mangano traveled to Denver last year to bestow upon Hickenlooper the council's "A Home for Every American Award."



**HICKENLOOPER**—named one of the top five big-city mayors in America by *Time Magazine* in 2005—has been the driving force behind Denver’s homeless plan. It all started in 2003 when Hickenlooper attended a national mayor’s conference. He heard that cities were spending more to combat homelessness, yet homeless populations were growing. He called together 41 “commissioners” from public, private and nonprofit sectors, including three homeless people, and set them on the task of researching and understanding the issues of homelessness in the city and county of Denver.

Eighteen months later that research became the basis for Denver’s Road Home—an eight-point plan to eradicate homelessness in 10 years. The plan was implemented in 2005, and last year, the University of Denver signed on as a partner agency.

Eric Fretz, director of DU’s Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, says “webs of networks have developed” between DU, city government and service providers involved in Denver’s Road Home. The University’s vision—to be a “great private university dedicated to the public good”—set the stage for the partnership, Fretz says.

“We can show we’re working on these issues that affect the rest of the city. It’s a great opportunity for DU to embrace its urban-ness in a real meaningful way through this partnership,” Fretz says.

The partnership kicked off in April 2007 when DU hosted Project Homeless Connect—a one-day, one-stop-shop for services like housing, identification, employment, medical treatment and legal help. Securing those services usually takes a month and numerous trips around town. It was the first time a U.S. university had hosted such an event. Altogether, 525 homeless people were served that day.

Nearly 800 DU students, faculty and staff volunteered as translators and guides, helping homeless individuals navigate the myriad offerings.

Since then, several research projects have been spawned, DU students have interned with Denver’s Road Home, and professors have connected their coursework to the initiative.

Carol Samson, a lecturer in DU’s Writing Program, had her first-year students write essays about their volunteer experiences.

Tom Knecht, a DU political science assistant professor, had his public opinion students help with a survey designed to determine Project Homeless Connect volunteers’ attitudes toward the homeless. He says volunteering changed attitudes for the better.

“Volunteers became less convinced that the homeless are necessarily drug abusers or are responsible for their situations,” Knecht says.

A winter quarter service-learning practicum will educate DU students about poverty and homelessness, and students will have

the opportunity to participate in Project Homeless Connect 6, which DU will host in spring 2008.

Although DU is expected to be a valuable partner in the program, the heavy lifting is up to service providers like the Denver Rescue Mission, Mile High United Way, St. Francis Center and many others, whose daily help is the difference between life and death for many of Denver’s poor.

A single incident can force a working family into homelessness virtually overnight: mental or physical illness, substance abuse, job loss or a partner’s departure. In Denver, job loss is the top reason people become homeless, according to MDHI.

Then, there’s the cost of housing. The Colorado Housing and Finance Authority says the average cost of housing has increased faster than wages over the last decade. According to the housing authority’s Web site, “the federal minimum wage doesn’t provide enough income for workers to afford an average two bedroom apartment anywhere in Colorado. A minimum wage worker would have to be on the job 129 hours per week to pay for such housing.”

DU management Professor Gordon Von Stroh has been studying Denver’s rental markets for more than 25 years. His latest affordable housing report, released in November, shows a 3.8 percent vacancy rate in metropolitan Denver, reflecting the paucity of available affordable housing. Statewide, the average rental rate for affordable housing is \$688, and in metro Denver that figure is \$708. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development calculates the median income for Denver families at \$71,000 per year. Von Stroh explains that renters typically make half that, and many of the area’s homeless make \$10,000 or less annually.

Denver’s Road Home targets those earning less than 30 percent of the area’s median income and the approximately 3,900 homeless that city officials say live in Denver.

Prevention is part of the plan, but the imminent need is to take care of those who have no place to go. Jamie Van Leeuwen, project manager for Denver’s Road Home, says getting people off the streets isn’t just the right thing to do; it’s the economical thing to do.

“It’s costing us approximately \$40,000 a year to keep somebody homeless and on the streets. It’s costing us approximately \$15,000 to put somebody into housing and to wrap them around with the services they need to stay off the streets,” Van Leeuwen says.

Van Leeuwen is unabashedly convinced the plan will work. In fact, he says it’s already working, pointing to a July plan update that shows remarkable strides in providing housing and jobs.

“When people ask ‘Is it possible to end homelessness in 10 years?’ my retort is always, ‘Is it impossible or is it inconceivable that in the next 10 years we would develop 3,900 units of housing, and enough jobs and enough substance abuse services for these 3,900 people to not have to be homeless?’”



*Eduardo Jimenez (top), 37, sleeps on the bank of the South Platte River when he can’t find a bed in a shelter. Jimenez came to Denver from Juarez, Mexico, seven months ago for medical treatment. “I’m not an alcoholic or addicted to drugs,” Jimenez says. “I’m just sick and need help.” Denver’s Road Home calls for medical and mental health services to help people like Jimenez and Randle Loeb (right), 56, who serves as caretaker at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in exchange for living there. Currently, “there is no safety net for people with mental illness,” says Loeb, who has bipolar disorder.*







*Chronically homeless people comprise only 8 percent of the homeless population but use the most expensive city services—often because they are mentally ill or abuse drugs and alcohol. Denver’s Road Home has so far resulted in a 36 percent decrease in the city’s chronically homeless population, which includes friends and drinking buddies Greg Johnson (top, on left), 46, and Paul Rees, 33. An encampment of chronically homeless men is tucked away amidst concrete road barriers a stone’s throw from I–25. The camp’s residents change, but the problem is usually the same: alcohol, which they chip in to buy together. “Louis” (bottom, on left) and “Eddie” (bottom, on right)—their names changed at their request—are current residents of “the cave,” which they say is safer than shelters. Louis has been on the streets for 15 years; Eddie has been homeless for just five months.*



**VAN LEEUWEN STARTS HIS DAY** early at 12th and Federal in a humble fourth floor office in the Denver Health and Human Service’s Castro building. On the first and second floors, babies cry, mothers wait in line, families huddle. They’re there to secure services and get benefits, just like those who came to the DU campus for Project Homeless Connect. He’s not far from the front lines and clearly that’s where he likes to be.

At Tulane University, Van Leeuwen earned master’s degrees in international public health and sociology. He worked for seven years at Denver’s Urban Peak, a nonprofit that provides shelter and services for homeless youths ages 14–24. He did street outreach, ran programs, oversaw fundraising, handled media and legislative work, and conducted research. The lessons he learned from homeless youth have helped inform his work with the broader homeless population.

After a few moments with Van Leeuwen, it’s hard not to put skepticism aside. He can point to nearly 800 new housing units, more than 1,600 new jobs, prevention of nearly 400 evictions and the numbers that really get attention—an 11 percent reduction in overall homelessness and a 36 percent decrease in chronic homelessness.

The chronically homeless use the most expensive city services such as detox treatment and emergency rooms, so reducing those numbers helps to save the city money.

It’s also the chronically homeless who create the stereotype: The homeless are lazy men who won’t work.

Not so, Van Leeuwen says. The face of homelessness looks like you. It’s working people (40 percent), women (29 percent), children (32 percent), and many of them (33 percent) are new to the life. They didn’t want to become that way and they certainly don’t want to stay that way.

Lisa Ware, who has been homeless for nine months, has two strikes against her: she’s an alcoholic and a felon. She says she’s been let down by those who were supposed to help her and now she distrusts the system. She wants to find work, get into a detox program and get “a roof over my head.” On a warm summer day, she looks to the sky. “I’m not going to be on the streets this winter. I am just not,” Ware says.

Ginger Wiggins was five months pregnant when her husband lapsed into drug use. She made him leave, realizing that while she earned enough at Starbucks to pay the rent, soon the baby would change everything.

“I was finally getting my life back together and I felt like I wanted to be self sufficient and do things on my own. I really wanted to be a good example for my child and to build a life that was just for us. I knew that’s what I wanted to do but I had no idea how to do it.”

On her way to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, a wrong turn took Wiggins to Warren Village, low-income housing for single-parent families. After four months on the waiting list, she moved in. She signed up for assistance programs, got her daughter into day care, and enrolled at Metro. Before she moved into another transitional housing program this year, she was named Warren Village’s 2007 Resident of the Year. Earlier this year she received a full-tuition scholarship from the Metro State Alumni Association.

Wiggins and Ware both faced addictions, were each on their own, and while one is on her way to becoming a special education teacher, the other is still struggling for survival. What works for one person won’t necessarily work for the next.



The complexities of homelessness require Denver’s Road Home to examine and respond to the underlying issues as well as the obvious need for housing. And it does. The plan calls for the creation of permanent, transitional and emergency housing, prevention programs, medical and mental health services, outreach, education and employment training, job development, increasing public awareness and support, and rezoning.

Churches, nonprofits, foundations, businesses, service agencies and a web of networks—a web that now includes DU—are actively and strategically engaged. Greta Walker, public relations director at the Denver Rescue Mission, says collaboration is key.

“The biggest positive of Denver’s Road Home is that this is a collaborative effort that we’re part of. It’s not just the higher ups that are trying to make the decisions,” Walker says.

Mile High United Way collaborates by handling fundraising and allocating donated funds to community programs. Seventy-five percent of the \$46 million goal has been met, fully funding the plan’s first four years. The biggest individual gift was a \$1 million donation from the family foundation of DU alumni Cydney (BSBA ’78, MBA ’80) and Thomas (MBA ’79) Marsico.

Funds are coming in from federal, state and local grants, from businesses and individuals. One of the more creative projects is the donation meter program. This year, 86 refurbished parking meters were installed in areas of heavy panhandling to collect spare change for Denver’s Road Home. Businesses and individuals have sponsored meters at \$1,000 each. There’s even a meter at University Boulevard and Evans Avenue—just across the street from the DU campus. Those meters are expected to collect about \$100,000 per year and Van Leeuwen says they’ve already virtually eliminated panhandling in the area.

**ALTHOUGH MANY REPRESENTATIVES** of Denver nonprofits sing the program and the mayor’s praises, not everyone agrees. There are the NIMBYs who don’t want shelters in their neighborhoods. A plan for a 24-hour emergency shelter was scuttled because of community opposition. St. Francis Center is one place homeless individuals can congregate during the day, but most shelters are evening-only operations.

Randle Loeb—a formerly homeless man who was on the commission that drafted Denver’s plan—says he signed on reluctantly. While it’s a step in the right direction, he says, it doesn’t reach those members of the homeless population who don’t want to participate in services; it doesn’t reach those who distrust the system; it doesn’t change the basic ‘haves versus have-nots’ system. And, it doesn’t even reach as far as Aurora, Colo., which is facing a pending homeless crisis of its own as low-rent motels give way to high-end urban development.

Ideally, Loeb would like to see a safety net from cradle to grave.

Loeb grew up in a middle-class Philadelphia suburb. His father was an attorney, and his mother was an actress. Loeb married and had three children. He earned two master’s degrees, including a divinity degree from the Iliff School of Theology. He’s on the Community and State Inter Agency Council to End Homelessness, he’s president of the MDHI board, he’s active on numerous civic boards, and is sexton at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church, where he resides.

He also produces the newspaper *Denver Metro Homeless Voice* and in 2007 received a presidential award for volunteerism and a 9News 9Who Care award.

Looking at him now, it’s hard to imagine the dynamic, articulate Loeb as hopeless. But he lost his home, family and business, and at 50, learned he has bipolar disorder.

“It’s a loss of things bit by bit by bit,” Loeb says.

The losses were too much. Loeb attempted suicide—six or seven times. The last time was on Sept. 11, 2001. When he awoke from a coma, he learned about the nation’s tragic events.

Loeb speaks of chronic homelessness and the loss of dignity, of work credentials, of the simple ability to take care of one’s self, and eventually, the loss of faith that there’s a way out. One of the greatest fears of people living outside who have lost connections with other people, he says, is that they’ll die without anyone knowing.

Somehow, Loeb survived “the abyss.”

“Among the homeless, people feel hopeless and helpless and have no idea anyone is trying to help them,” Loeb says.

Part of the problem, he says, is that people don’t take the time for one another—that we live in a system where success is judged in a narrowly defined way. Loeb shows his gratitude for life by using his time to advocate for the homeless and poor.

“I’m constantly fighting with the system regarding how can we make it more possible for the homeless and poor to live in harmony with the rest of society,” Loeb says.

Loeb intends to make sure that Denver’s Road Home officials don’t rest on their laurels. Despite this year’s report of successes—Loeb says he’s skeptical—the economy could wreak havoc on those most at-risk.

Rich Audsley, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Mile High United Way, says the majority of the 110,000 calls per year to the city’s 2-1-1 service are requests for financial assistance for life’s basic needs—rent, utility payments, food or clothing. Last year alone, 19,425 real estate foreclosures were filed in the seven-county Denver area.

Tom Luehrs, executive director at St. Francis Center, worries that the nation’s priorities aren’t with the homeless.

“If we’re trying to take care of the people in Iraq and Afghanistan and pouring billions of dollars into those economies,” Luehrs says, “there are fewer dollars to be spent at home on those in greatest need.” ■



Denver’s homelessness prevention programs are designed to help people like Amy (who declined to give her last name) and her sons—3-year-old Miguel (left, at center) and 5-year-old Visent—who stopped by the Denver Rescue Mission’s Lawrence Street shelter for lunch the day before they were to be evicted from their apartment. Amy has been homeless on and off for most of her life and says she doesn’t know where she and the children will live.

Like 40 percent of Denver’s homeless population, Michael Coughlin (right) has a job. He says his stay at the Denver Rescue Mission is “100 percent temporary.” But for regulars at the St. Paul’s United Methodist Church Sunday soup kitchen (bottom)—the longest-running in Denver—homelessness is a more persistent problem.



Visit [www.du.edu/magazine](http://www.du.edu/magazine) to watch a student documentary about Project Homeless Connect and read an article about DU research on homeless teens. Online, you’ll also find a profile of DU alumnus and Denver Rescue Mission employee Ray Maestas.