

Nashville Homeless System Assessment and Preliminary Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Purpose of Report

The City of Nashville's Metropolitan Homelessness Commission (MHC), Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency (MDHA), and the Frist Foundation have engaged Focus Strategies to assess the performance of the existing homeless system and the community's efforts to reduce homelessness. Between June and September 2015, we collected and analyzed data to assess the performance of individual programs, program types, and the system as a whole. We also conducted telephone interviews with key stakeholders to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current system, and to assess what kinds of changes the City of Nashville could consider to support its goals. The results of our analysis are presented in this report and will be used by MHC, MDHA, and the Frist Foundation to inform the next steps in its system planning work, including developing an integrated set of strategies to further reduce homelessness in Nashville and an updated governance model to carry out the new direction.

Nashville Homeless System Accomplishments and Strengths

The City of Nashville and Nashville/Davidson County CoC have implemented a number of impressive initiatives to address homelessness. The community has many strengths it can build upon to develop a system to reduce homelessness:

- There is engaged and committed leadership (including the Mayor's Office, MHC, MDHA and the Frist Foundation) who are willing to explore what system changes are needed and to achieve greater reductions in homelessness by aligning interventions with evidence-based practices and federal policy priorities;
- The whole community is involved in existing efforts to make changes, including non-profit providers, faith-based providers, housing developers, property owners and landlords, publicly funded service systems, and the philanthropic community;
- All the key components of what Nashville needs to build a system to end homelessness are already in place or under development, including street outreach (to both chronically homeless people and youth), Coordinated Entry for some populations, prevention/diversion efforts, shelter and interim housing, a small but growing inventory of rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing;
- The How's Nashville campaign has demonstrated that significant progress can be made by prioritizing those homeless households with the highest needs for assistance and leveraging mainstream housing and services systems to help meet those needs, including Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8); and
- There is a large and very engaged community of faith congregations, faith-based service providers, private foundations and other non-governmental resources that support the work currently underway (including operation and funding of much of the community's shelter and transitional housing inventory) – presenting an opportunity for the public and private sectors to work together to set and meet common goals.

Given the relatively small size of the unsheltered homeless population in Nashville, the existing inventory of programs, and the resources currently invested in the homeless system, getting to functionally zero homeless households is a realizable goal. To accomplish this objective, the community will need an updated leadership and governance model that can successfully bring together private and public sector resources.

Results of System Performance Assessment and Preliminary Recommendations

Key performance assessment results from our analysis as well as preliminary recommendations are summarized below.

Key Findings	
1. Governance	Collectively, the CoC, MDHA, MHC, and housing and service providers and the broader Nashville community have come together to implement an impressive array of efforts to address homelessness. While the providers in the community are generally making the effort to coordinate and collaborate, effectively each program operates independently based on their individual goals and agency missions, which lessens the collective impact and makes it difficult for all the parts to work together towards a common set of goals. We found that there is no comprehensive plan to tackle homelessness systematically, which is also reflected in a lack of unified leadership and governance structure. The need for a more formalized and clear governance and decision-making process, and higher level coordination, is evident in the assessment of system performance.
2. Data Quality and HMIS Participation	Generally speaking, the quality of the data in the Nashville/Davidson County CoC’s HMIS system is of high quality, with relatively few missing data elements. However, the usefulness of the data is somewhat limited by the relatively low rate of participation by providers, particularly those operating emergency shelters (and some transitional housing). Though these providers are not required by their funding sources to participate, including them would significantly improve the community’s ability to assess system performance. Since information on these clients is not integrated with the rest of the programs in the system, it lessens the usefulness of the data for understanding of how clients move between HMIS participating and non-participating programs and how the system as a whole is performing.
3. System Performance	Using data drawn from HMIS and individual program budgets, as well as data from the Rescue Mission’s HMIS-compatible database, Focus Strategies assessed the performance of emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing on the following metrics. Our findings are summarized in this report.

Key Findings	
a. Bed and Unit Utilization	We found a relatively low bed and unit utilization rate in many areas of the system: 72% for single adult shelter beds, 75% for family transitional housing, and 80% for transitional housing for single adults. This suggests that system inventory is not being used to maximum capacity and likely is partly the result of programs having high barriers to entry and restrictive eligibility criteria.
b. Entries from Homelessness	Currently many of the programs in the system are serving a high number of households who were not literally homeless upon entry. In particular, 47% of families entering shelter and 39% entering transitional housing were coming from housed situations. This reflects the fact that each program is establishing their own individual eligibility criteria and may not require households to be literally homeless upon entry. In a high performing system, beds are prioritized for people who are literally homeless while those who are still housed are diverted from entering the system (and housing is preserved or new housing is secured). This finding is also likely related to the presence of high entry barriers among some of the programs in the system.
c. Lengths of Stay	Lengths of stay are relatively high in all system components, and particularly transitional housing where the average stay is 159 days for single adults 298 days for families. Program providers often structure their service models on the assumption that longer stays lead to higher rates of exit to permanent housing. Yet, as noted below, the data does not support this assumption.
d. Rate of Exit to Permanent Housing	The rate at which households exit emergency shelter and transitional housing to permanent housing is relatively low, with transitional programs exiting only 48% of single adults and 67% of families to permanent housing. By comparison, rapid re-housing, which has the same or shorter lengths of stay, is faring much better on this measure, with 78% of single adults and 99% of families exiting to permanent housing.
e. Cost Per Permanent Housing Exit	Nashville’s Rapid Re-Housing programs are not only achieving better results in terms of the numbers of households who exit to permanent housing, but they also do so more cost effectively. The cost for each permanent housing exit from rapid re-housing is one-third the cost of transitional housing for singles and one sixth the cost of transitional housing for families.
f. Rate of Return to Homelessness	For households who exit to permanent housing, the rate of return to homelessness is generally very low across all program types. There is no information to suggest that people who secure permanent housing more quickly and cost effectively using rapid re-housing are more likely to experience a loss of housing and return to homelessness. Rate of return is calculated by looking at all the households who exit to permanent housing in a year and then seeing if any of them re-enter any homeless program in the next 12 month period.

Preliminary Recommendations	
1. Establish a Leadership Structure With Authority, Resources and Vision to Oversee a Systems Change Process to Create a Housing Crisis Resolution System	The single most important initial step for Nashville is for the community leadership to come together and identify or create a single entity that will be tasked with moving forward transformation of the current collection of programs into a Housing Crisis Resolution System – meaning a system designed to ensure that no one is ever homeless for longer than 30 days. This new leadership entity must: involve high-level decision makers, include private and public funders aligned around a common set of objectives, have the ability to oversee a system planning process, and have the authority to set policy and implement identified strategies to end homelessness.
2. Use Coordinated Entry and Remove Program Barriers To Ensure that Literally Homeless and Higher Need Households Can Be Prioritized	The existing programs and services in Nashville that provided data for this analysis are serving large numbers of people who are not literally homeless, even while there are many unsheltered individuals in the community. To make faster progress on ending homelessness, the new governance entity will need to adopt policies and strategies to ensure that programs are prioritizing people who are living outdoors, in vehicles, or in emergency shelter. These policies would include the removal of entry barriers and requirements to accept referrals from coordinated entry.
3. Provide Shelter Diversion to Those Who Are Still Housed	Nashville’s new coordinated entry system should integrate a strong shelter diversion component to help keep households who are not yet homeless from entering the system. This can build upon the planned diversion/prevention effort that is currently planned to launch in November as part of the coordinated entry system for families. To be maximally effective, shelter diversion should target those households who are imminently going to be homeless within a few days.
4. Invest in High Performing Rapid Re-Housing	Rapid re-housing programs in Nashville are achieving strong results in exiting people to permanent housing with low rates of return to homelessness in comparison to either shelter or transitional housing. This suggests that the system could likely house more homeless people with an expansion of rapid re-housing and a shift of resources from lower performing transitional housing. This approach can complement the work already being done by the 2016 by 2016 campaign and focus on the non-chronically homeless population.
5. Increase System Capacity in Landlord Recruitment and Housing Navigation	As Nashville seeks to expand rapid re-housing and continue the 2016 by 2016 campaign to house chronically homeless people using Housing Choice Vouchers and other permanent supportive housing vouchers, the high cost of housing will make it difficult for participants to locate appropriate units. Experience from other communities suggests that this problem can be mitigated through expending system resources on

Preliminary Recommendations	
	staff who are dedicated to cultivating relationships with landlords and to helping clients with searching for and securing housing.
6. Engage Providers Not Currently Participating in HMIS	A key obstacle to conducting effective system planning in Nashville is the relatively low rate of participation in HMIS, particularly among providers who do not receive federal homelessness funding (and therefore are not required to participate). With many key programs not currently contributing data, it is very difficult to have a complete system-level understanding of where clients are entering the system, what programs they access, and the results of the interventions. The CoC (through MDHA, which manages the HMIS) is working to expand participation. To support the development of a Housing Crisis Resolution System, the new leadership/governance entity will need to be involved in engaging non-participating providers and developing strategies to include them in the system.

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