



F O C U S
strategies

HOME SONOMA COUNTY

**SONOMA COUNTY'S HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE SYSTEM:
BASELINE ASSESSMENT SUMMARY**

Prepared by Focus Strategies

05 • 19 • 2020



(916) 436-1836



FocusStrategies.net



340 S Lemon Ave, STE 1815, Walnut, CA 91789

SONOMA COUNTY HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE SYSTEM: BASELINE ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

Home Sonoma County, also known as the homeless “Continuum of Care” for the Sonoma County region, is working on a strategic action plan. The goals of the plan are to coordinate and improve the region’s efforts to reduce homelessness. Sonoma County Community Development Commission (CDC) contracted with Focus Strategies to help Home Sonoma County and regional leaders evaluate what is working well now and improve strategies to reduce homelessness.

I. BACKGROUND

As a first phase in the strategic action planning project, Focus Strategies completed a Baseline Assessment of the pre-COVID-19 homelessness response system in Sonoma County. This document summarizes the Baseline Assessment. The Baseline Assessment looked at the scale of homelessness within the region, the types of crisis and housing resources available, and the effectiveness of current efforts. Phase One (the Baseline Assessment) is now completed and the project is moving to Phase Two.

In Phase Two, Focus Strategies will be reviewing data on homelessness, evaluating outcomes from homeless service programs and Coordinated Entry, and analyzing the local housing market. Phase Two will also look more closely at specific needs within different cities and towns of Sonoma County. During Phase Three, a strategic action plan for the region will be written and adopted.

II. BASELINE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Baseline Assessment looks at current strengths and challenges of the homelessness response system in Sonoma County as of February 2020. Focus Strategies gathered several types of information for the assessment. Focus Strategies read strategic plans, reports, and funding applications that had been written in recent years and looked at data on the number of people experiencing homelessness in the region.

Additionally, Focus Strategies talked with dozens of people in Sonoma County through interviews and focus groups. Participants included elected officials, funders of homelessness response services, people currently experiencing homelessness, members of the region’s Home Sonoma County Leadership Council, leaders from related systems of care (e.g., health



services, behavioral health services, child welfare, etc.), and advocates. In the interviews and focus groups, participants shared trends in homelessness, successes and challenges of current programs, and coordination between different programs and regions.

The Baseline Assessment looks at if the region is currently operating a functional and effective homelessness response system. Effective homelessness response systems reduce literal homelessness, have high performing programs, and strong permanent housing strategies. They also have strong leadership, the ability to use data and evaluation for planning, and enough staff capacity to develop and implement strategies.

It is important to understand that the information gathered for the Baseline Assessment was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. Information on the impact of the pandemic on people experiencing homelessness and the community's response are not reflected in the Baseline Assessment but will be included in Phase Two and Phase Three.

III. OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Overall, the Baseline Assessment found that Home Sonoma County has many important system elements in place. For example, Home Sonoma County has a thoughtful governance structure, Coordinated Entry policies and procedures, a network of program services from crisis response to permanent housing solutions, and active participation by diverse stakeholder groups in system planning. This is a strong foundation for local leaders to build upon.

Key areas of improvement to strengthen the system include:

- A need for increased clarity and communication of roles and responsibilities amongst the various entities within the homelessness response system's governance structure;
- The development of a set of shared priorities and strategies among system leaders to inform funding and policy decisions;
- More training and accountability for service providers on Housing First and low barrier approaches; and,
- More resources for crisis response and permanent housing solutions.



The Baseline Assessment is organized in five sections: Leadership and Governance; Coordinated Entry; Crisis Response; Temporary Sheltered Solutions; and Permanent Housing Solutions.

A. Leadership and Governance

One of the strengths of Sonoma County's homelessness response system leadership is its ability to adapt and respond. This was demonstrated when leadership quickly coordinated and responded during the 2017 and 2019 wildfires. In late 2019, community leadership also mobilized to respond to the crisis of unsheltered homelessness on the Joe Rodota Trail, the most populated encampment area in County history. The system has also adapted its response to homelessness as policies or needs in the community change. For example, the community implemented a coordinated entry system, as required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). It also redesigned the regional governance structure to Home Sonoma County. The structure of Home Sonoma County aims to reduce duplication and fragmentation across decision-making agencies, and to use data and regional systems thinking to inform planning efforts.

The Home Sonoma County governance structure is still in an early phase of operation. The challenges observed reflect the current phase of implementation, some of which may self-resolve over time. There is currently a lack of shared vision for the action steps needed to reduce homelessness most effectively in the region. There also seems to be unclear guidance on the goals and responsibilities of the different groups that are part of Home Sonoma County's governance structure (for example, the Technical Advisory Committee and various Task Groups). Additionally, there was some concern shared as to whether input from service providers, cities not currently represented with seats on the Leadership Council, and people with lived experience of homelessness was heard by and adequately considered in decisions made by the Leadership Council. Finally, concern was shared about if the Community Development Commission (CDC) has enough staff or funding to fulfill the role and responsibilities asked of a Lead Agency in the newly designed structure.

B. Coordinated Entry

Having a Coordinated Entry System (CES) is a requirement of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in order to receive federal funding for homelessness. Home Sonoma County has successfully involved agencies in CES by including participation requirements in contracts that are administered by CDC. In addition to operating a Coordinated



Entry System for connections to permanent housing resources, Home Sonoma County added a Diversion pre-screening tool to CES that helps people identify alternate safe housing options. This strategy can help people to resolve their housing crises before entering shelter. Overall, there was a strong sense expressed that CES has improved the ways in which providers communicate and coordinate.

The Baseline Assessment also identified several ways CES can improve. A few challenges that community members expressed are a perception of lack of transparency around CES decisions, a gap in timely communication of CES procedures, and inconsistent agreement with CES policies (for example, the prioritization criteria). There is also concern that there are not enough organized or formal ways for people experiencing homelessness to help design the system or programs.

C. Crisis Response

In the past year, the crisis and public health needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness have received more attention and new resources. Sonoma County currently has multiple outreach teams, with some tailored towards specific communities or offering specialized services such as street-based medical care. Additionally, as a large number of people (over 25%) who are homeless in Sonoma County stay in vehicles, the number of safe parking programs has slowly increased to provide people with a safe place to park overnight.

Sonoma County also experiences a number of challenges related to crisis response. In particular, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness continue to lack access to bathrooms, showers, safe places to park, mental health services, harm reduction, and substance use services. Additionally, multiple stakeholders expressed concern about a lack of strategy around crisis response planning. Strategy is needed for crisis response policies and funding, as well as coordination between outreach teams.

D. Temporary Sheltered Solutions

By temporary sheltered solutions, we mean emergency shelter and transitional housing. One of the successes of Sonoma County's temporary sheltered solutions is an increase in the number of exits from shelter to permanent housing in recent years.

While permanent housing exits have increased, there were also multiple challenges related to temporary sheltered solutions that came up in the Baseline Assessment process. These



include inconsistent agreement with Housing First approaches, a need for greater training around Housing First approaches (for example, harm reduction), and a potential need for more staff or funding to better support people in shelters and transitional housing programs. Additionally, multiple people expressed concern about the safety and quality level of existing shelter programs.

E. Permanent Housing Solutions

There are a number of strengths in Home Sonoma County's current efforts to connect people experiencing homelessness to permanent housing. First, CDC has increased the system resources dedicated to permanent housing solutions, such as rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing. The community is also exploring landlord engagement strategies with the goal of improving landlord relationships and making new rental housing available. Permanent supportive housing program models like the Palms Inn have also been promising.

Key challenges in Sonoma County for permanent housing solutions include: having multiple Housing Authorities with different policies and processes, inconsistent use of Housing First approaches by rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing programs, low vacancy rates for affordable rental housing, and a shortage of permanent supportive housing availability.

IV. INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Baseline Assessment process, Focus Strategies identified four initial recommendations that can help in Home Sonoma County's efforts to reduce homelessness.

1. Explore CDC Staffing and Funding Needs

The Leadership Council and Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) look to the Community Development Commission (CDC) to provide information and recommendations for decisions about the homelessness response system. To do this well, CDC needs enough staff to evaluate local needs, research different options to inform decisions, and prepare and present information to Leadership Council, TAC, and elected officials. Home Sonoma County is encouraged to look at current staffing and funding levels to see if additional resources are needed so CDC can complete their responsibilities as the Lead Agency.



2. Coordinate New Crisis Response Services

In December 2019, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved \$12 million in new funding to develop crisis response services for people who had been staying on or near the Joe Rodota Trail. The new programs include housing and sheltering options, including two pilot indoor-outdoor shelters, as well as increased mental health and substance use services. It is important these new services are connected with Coordinated Entry policies and processes. This coordination should happen quickly, so people accessing these new services are also able to link with the resources available through Coordinated Entry (for example, permanent supportive housing).

3. Increase Outreach Coordination

Sonoma County has a large number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and multiple outreach programs that work in overlapping regions. It is important that Home Sonoma County develops a plan to better coordinate services and to improve communication between teams. As a starting point, it would help to identify where each outreach team currently works. Then, leadership can look to see if there are places where there are large numbers of people who are homeless and where outreach is not happening. Some teams offer specialized services - for example, they may serve youth or Veterans or people who have serious mental health concerns. A plan should be made to figure out how to connect specialized teams with people who need their services. Having a regional strategy for outreach will maximize resources and improve outcomes.

4. Support Housing First Practices

Home Sonoma County has adopted a Housing First strategy for all of its programs. To improve services across the region, it will help to assess strengths and challenges programs face now when using Housing First. An evaluation should also ask about trainings or resources needed by programs to use Housing First and other best practices. Once this happens, Home Sonoma County can make a plan to train and support programs to improve service delivery. Community Development Commission (CDC) will likely need more staff to do the evaluation and training, or Home Sonoma County can partner more with the Department of Health System's existing training program.

