



MEMORANDUM

Date: October 8, 2020

To: Barbie Robinson, Department of Health Services Director
Tina Rivera, Department of Health Services Assistant Director
Michael Gause, Ending Homelessness Manager

From: Kate Bristol, Director of Consulting
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Topic: Summary of Interviews with City Managers

A. Background

Home Sonoma County, through its lead agency, the Sonoma County Community Development Commission (CDC), has engaged Focus Strategies to assist community leadership and key stakeholders to evaluate, align, and improve the countywide response to the local crisis of homelessness. In the first phase of this work, Focus Strategies conducted information gathering and developed a Baseline System Assessment drawn primarily from qualitative information sources. The purpose of the Baseline Assessment was to develop an understanding of the current response to homelessness in region and assess its strengths and challenges. As part of this work, Focus Strategies conducted interviews with almost 20 key stakeholders representing a range of sectors, including elected officials; local government staff; philanthropic funders; non-profit housing and service providers; advocates, and others; and on-site interviews with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

In March 2020, as the work on the Baseline Assessment was wrapping up, the CDC requested that Focus Strategies conduct an additional set of interviews with representatives of the nine cities in Sonoma County. The purpose of this work was to:

- Understand the unique needs and trends of homelessness within each jurisdiction.

- Understand the strengths, challenges, and availability of current services and resources within each jurisdiction, and how they relate or connect to the broader countywide system of services available across the region.
- Identify current investments and strategies to address homelessness at the local level and how those align with regional approaches.
- Explore opportunities and potential impacts of changes to the governance structure of the Continuum of Care (with a focus on impact of jurisdictional representation); and,
- Provide an opportunity to voice any questions or concerns about system performance, strategy, or priorities.

The interviews took place by telephone in May 2020. A total of seven cities participated: Cloverdale, Healdsburg, Petaluma, Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, Sonoma and Windsor. In each case, Focus Strategies interviewed the City Manager and for one interview an Assistant City Manager also joined the call. This memo summarizes our findings from the interviews.

B. Summary of Findings

Each City Manager we interviewed expressed unique views and shared their City's specific and local perspective on the issue of homelessness. While there were many different views expressed, some common themes emerged that seemed to be broadly shared among the jurisdictions.

1. Developing Local Solutions to Respond to Local Needs

All of the cities in Sonoma County, regardless of the size of the population of people experiencing homelessness, take the problem seriously and all expressed a desire to find solutions responsive to their local needs. Solutions funded at the City level tend to vary significantly and are very dependent on the availability of either dedicated funding for housing and homelessness or unrestricted local funds. Larger jurisdictions with more resources, particularly Santa Rosa and Petaluma, are investing in a range of programs dedicated to addressing homelessness, including outreach, safe parking sites, emergency shelter and housing development. But even in the smaller jurisdictions with more modest resources, we found that cities are investing in a range of strategies. For example:

- Several North County cities have recently joined together to conduct a planning process facilitated by a local consultant and with the involvement of Supervisor Gore. This plan will focus on coordination among the North County cities and strategies to address service gaps.



- The City of Cloverdale has developed a Community Advisory Group that has developed guiding principles and major strategies for responding to homelessness at the local level. The plan focuses on the City's response to homelessness and affordable housing. Their planning framework is modeled after the approach used for the development of the North County Plan. As of the interview, their planning process was still underway and had been paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All the City Managers strongly affirmed that they believe cities have an important role to play in addressing homelessness. Most noted that affordable housing development is typically a primary responsibility of cities, and that having an adequate supply of deeply affordable housing is critical to solving homelessness.

2. Frustration with System Fragmentation and Lack of Overall Countywide Strategy

While acknowledging their city's role in addressing homelessness, the City Managers all articulated a strong belief that cities cannot solve the problem on their own and expressed a desire for much stronger overall leadership and coordination from the County. The cities feel challenged by what they perceive as the lack of a well understood and clearly communicated countywide strategy to which they can align and orient their local efforts. Many said that they did not understand the County's overall strategy on homelessness or that they felt the overall strategy did not exist.

Another key theme was that the County's efforts are perceived as moving too slowly and not responsive to city concerns, so the cities have had no choice but to "go it alone" in undertaking their own planning and program implementation. A related concern was that cities do not see evidence that the countywide systems, such as Coordinated Entry (CE), are having an impact locally. Many raised concerns about CE and whether people experiencing homelessness in their jurisdiction are gaining access to the programs that are filled through CE, including those funded by the Continuum of Care (CoC) or County sources. The system for allocating these housing placements is seen by the cities as unclear and lacking in transparency. A few cities also raised concerns about programs in their area that have lost CoC funding due to not aligning with federal Housing First requirements. Some expressed that the lack of resources available for providers was not sufficient to comply with Housing First expectations, which require providers to lower barriers to program entry and serve individuals with more intensive service needs.

Several of the jurisdictions expressed the view that the County's resources for addressing homelessness are not equitably distributed and disproportionately favor larger cities in the South County. Others felt that resources are being distributed in alignment with need, but



that the County's strategies themselves are not responsiveness to local nuances. For example, needs in more rural areas are different than those in more densely populated regions, such as transportation barriers and lack of shelter programs.

3. Desire for A More Coordinated and County-City Led Effort

The City Managers unanimously expressed a desire for a clear, strategic vision for reducing homelessness for the entire region and for leadership to come from the County in partnership with the cities. Cities articulated a need for the County to take the lead on homeless system development, particularly to create the full range of solutions needed to respond to homelessness and to operate an effective Coordinated Entry System. But at the same time, cities want to be engaged and involved as full partners in development and implementation of system, to ensure that their local efforts and investments are aligned to an overall shared strategy and to allow for flexibility in implementation and responsiveness to local and sub-regional needs. Several of the City Managers noted that having a more clear and coordinated countywide effort would empower local leaders to build greater community support for homelessness response solutions and would provide cities with more informed responses to criticisms of their efforts that may arise within jurisdictions.

In discussing options for how to structure a County-City led effort on homelessness, several City Managers felt a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) would be the best option. A JPA would create a new entity that allows the County and cities to jointly hold responsibility for addressing homelessness. It would also allow the jurisdictions to pool funds and share in the decision-making process about how they are invested. Others felt that adding more seats for cities to the existing Home Sonoma County Leadership Council would be a potential avenue to improve coordination and shared responsibility between the County and cities. However, others expressed skepticism that the existing Leadership Council, even if restructured, would have the authority and power to effectively develop and implement a coordinated countywide strategy on homelessness.

