

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN SAN MATEO COUNTY

Overview: Through collaboration and system transformation, reach “functional zero” homelessness by 2020, rendering it a rare, brief and non-recurring experience for San Mateo County residents.

Challenge: The San Mateo County 2013 Homeless One Day Count revealed a peak in homelessness in 10 years, with 2,002 individuals observed on one night. In 2015, the Board of Supervisors and County Manager inspired a collective commitment to prevent and end homelessness and declared this as one of the county’s top 3 priorities. This prompted investment of dedicated local funds to prevent households from becoming homeless and to finding tangible solutions, despite the county being characterized by extraordinarily high housing costs. Low income households with housing subsidies faced unprecedented obstacles in finding landlords to accept their housing vouchers, due to stigma and competition with market rates. And perhaps one of the largest challenges remains engaging the chronic homeless: those who are unsheltered, have been homeless for a long period of time, and have a disability.

Innovative Solutions: San Mateo County has long invested in homelessness prevention strategies, however, challenges in housing affordability called for new ideas. In 2015, the Human Services Agency aligned with key partners, including shelters, safety-net and domestic violence service providers, to conduct data-driven system planning and evaluation, and developed the Plan to End Homelessness (“Plan”). San Mateo County recognized that only through intense collaboration, an acceptance of homeless system changes, innovative new strategies, and local partnerships, could a lasting impact be made. The Plan applied national best practices to local conditions, strengths, and characteristics, and laid out milestones for the new system. This inspired the County’s innovative Housing Crisis Resolution System (HCRS), a collaboration among providers to assess clients through a standardized ‘Coordinated Entry System’, provide shelter diversion, and prioritize those with the highest barriers into interim housing. The HCRS focuses on ensuring a safe and stable place to live as a foundation to address other (employment, health, and behavioral health) needs and devising a path back to self-sufficiency. In tandem, a “housing locator” program secures rental units for the chronically homeless and those with subsidies.

Originality: The County funds a structured, regional network of emergency safety net service providers termed the “Core Services Agencies” to provide emergency food, shelter referrals, and rental/utility assistance; ensuring equal access and consistent services are offered throughout the county. With this infrastructure in place, the County partnered with law enforcement and medical partners to employ a multidisciplinary approach to build trust with, and engage into services, people experiencing chronic homelessness. This approach provides rapid-response and basic services in the field such as

assessments, shelter referrals, while a public health nurse and psychiatrist administer 'street medicine' services in the field, such as physical exams, referrals to primary care, and mental health screening. Additionally, all police agencies educate officers on homelessness resources through a County-produced video, promoting a mutually beneficial strategy of engaging the homeless and connecting them to services, while saving valuable resources of the law enforcement agency by reducing citations, bookings and citizen complaints. At the governmental level, a "Housing our Clients" workgroup gathers Department Directors to maximize resources and opportunities to stably house clients served by County systems amid a challenging housing environment. This county collaboration has resulted in establishing a preference for new housing developments who reserve units for vulnerable populations.

Cost Effectiveness: \$12 million is devoted to the county's Human Services Agency for fiscal year 2017-18 towards services such as rapid rehousing, homeless shelters, outreach, and safety net services. While the goal of ending homelessness in San Mateo County is not aligned to a fiscal gain, there are cost-savings to matching the local population's needs to the most appropriate strategy. For example, the cost to permanently house an adult household is \$4,609 through rapid re-housing, a proven strategy that yields a 75% cost savings over traditional methods such as transitional housing. Additional cost savings are evidenced in the reduced rate of emergency room visits, criminal recidivism, and law enforcement intervention. This approach suggests that a newly housed individual who was once unsheltered will reduce their use of higher-cost public services – either in regards to law or health—due to the stabilization in their newfound environment.

Results: The 2017 Homeless Count found 637 unsheltered and 616 sheltered, a decrease of 16% homeless, for a 10-year low of 1,253 individuals. 137 households have been housed through the housing locator strategy since its February 2016 launch. Since July 2016, over 350 homeless individuals received outreach services, 227 received case management, and 93 outreach clients have been housed in emergency shelter, transitional housing or permanent housing. Early data show that the Housing Crisis Resolution System is trending in the right direction: Between October 2015 and September 2016, 54% of all persons exiting emergency shelter, transitional housing, or rapid rehousing programs went into permanent housing. This is an 11% increase from the prior year. During this same period, the percentage of those who returned to homelessness from permanent housing dropped by 4%.

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