

Homelessness in Mendocino County

An update to the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors – May 9, 2023

INTRODUCTION

The following report provides an overview of the Mendocino County Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness, a brief description of major projects related to homelessness accomplished within the past few years, and a high-level overview of the major funding sources available to address homelessness in Mendocino County.

At a community level, homelessness is created through a complex and numerous set of factors that are both societal and individual in nature. There is no single cause of homelessness. Contributing factors to homelessness include poverty, trauma, family crises, substance use, mental illness, unexpected financial crises, loss of employment, disability, complex physical health issues, loss of family/friend connections through death or fractured relationships, domestic violence, and many others. All of these factors are deeply amplified by a profound lack of housing stock in Mendocino County, and indeed, across the state of California.

Resolving homelessness in Mendocino County requires a deep commitment to collaboration, creativity, communication, the sharing of resources, and a highly trained workforce. Within the County of Mendocino, multiple departments contribute to the patchwork of programs and services impacted by homelessness - including Social Services, Public Health, Behavioral Health, Probation, the Jail, the Sheriff's Department, Code Enforcement, and Planning and Building. Hardy and intrepid, but still relatively few, community based organizations contribute significantly to tackling the challenge of homelessness. Nonetheless, the County alone cannot solve the problems of homelessness, nor is the County solely responsible for resolution. Successful outcomes, both at an individual and societal level, require the full participation and engagement from all municipalities, relevant community-based organizations, public agencies, homeless services providers, homeless individuals themselves, and the public.

This report is written from the perspective of County of Mendocino staff. However, the Mendocino County Homeless Services Continuum of Care (CoC) merits considerable recognition as the entity tasked with coordinating a framework for addressing homelessness in a collaborative manner, as well as facilitating and providing oversight to some, but not all, of the funding dedicated to Mendocino County for homeless services. The CoC is composed of volunteer members who dedicate their time and energy to addressing these issues. The County is grateful for their ongoing commitment and support of collaboration, communication, and shared decision-making. More information at www.mendocinococ.org

Over the past ten years, as the visibility of homelessness became increasingly apparent in our community, the County of Mendocino has attempted to approach this challenge with both compassion and clear-eyed honesty. Homelessness is deeply impactful to our cities and rural regions – in our schools, our business community, our community-based-organizations, our hospitals and clinics, our

jails, within our criminal justice system, and for many, within their own family networks. But ultimately, homelessness is above all, a tragedy for those experiencing it.

Our community has seen tremendous progress over the past five years in tackling the challenges of homelessness. We look forward to continued growth and success in the years to come.

STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

The Strategic Planning Committee of the Mendocino Homeless Services Continuum of Care met throughout a six month span of time in 2019, with the goal of developing a **unified strategic plan**. The first draft of this Plan was approved by the CoC Board in April 2020. The Plan was subsequently endorsed by the County of Mendocino, the City of Fort Bragg, the City of Point Arena, and the City of Ukiah. An update to the Plan was completed in August 2022, and approved by the Homeless Services Continuum of Care.

Of note, **the Strategic Plan incorporates twenty of the twenty-eight recommendations originally described by Dr. Robert Marbut** in his report to the County of Mendocino in March, 2018. The Continuum of Care's Strategic Planning Committee carefully reviewed and largely endorsed Dr. Marbut's recommendations, with a few exceptions that were omitted from the final plan because they were unclear and vague, and/or were not within the purview of the CoC.

The Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness was designed to be a useful tool for those engaged in the work of addressing homelessness. The primary audience for the Plan is not necessarily the public, and as such, many of the specific objectives and action steps within the plan will not be easily accessible to the public.

Both the CoC Board and County staff note that we have not dedicated enough time and resources to communicating with the public about the scope and scale of local homelessness issues, how they are being addressed, and the challenges and successes we have experienced. This report is a small first-step attempt to generate better public communication about an issue that is critically important to the health and well-being of our community.

For further information about the CoC, please visit www.mendocinococ.org.

STRATEGIC PLAN SUMMARY

Goal 1: Make Homelessness Rare

- 1.1 Source new housing opportunities of all types whenever possible.
- 1.2 Identify and support programs that provide effective homelessness prevention and diversion services.
- 1.3 Review and evaluate overall system volume needs on a regular basis for continuous program improvement.

Goal 2: Make homelessness brief and one-time

- 2.1 Identify the most effective homelessness programs within the County, particularly those that provide emergency, non-congregate, transitional, and permanent housing to individuals experiencing homelessness, and provide support to expand or maintain services.
- 2.2 Increase utilization of housing resources already available in the community.
- 2.3 Create quicker and seamless movement through the homelessness system for all individuals and families experiencing homelessness
- 2.4 Develop and implement collaborative strategies to engage individuals experiencing street-level homelessness.
- 2.5 Fully build out and robustly use our Homeless Management Information System.
- 2.6 Launch an initiative specifically focused on the unique needs of homeless families with children.

Goal 3: Improve community and policymaker engagement around homelessness

- 3.1 Gain buy-in and agreement for one overarching strategic plan—with action steps.
- 3.2 Improve strategic coordination between the CoC, the County and cities.
- 3.3 Develop a community understanding of the scope, scale, and structure of the homelessness problem and to use common nomenclature to improve decision-making.
- 3.4 Increase engagement of persons with lived experience with homelessness in planning, implementation and decision-making for the CoC.

Goal 4: Improve the CoC's capacity to govern itself.

- 4.1 Ensure governance charter, strategic plan, and board committees stay active, current, and relative to the mission of the organization.
- 4.2 Incorporate performance measures related to Strategic Plan in all contracts initiated by the CoC.
- 4.3 Continue the establishment of a diverse board that fills perspective, skills, and knowledge gaps

THE PAST THREE YEARS – 2020 TO PRESENT

The Covid-19 pandemic brought extraordinary challenges to the County's system of support for homeless households. Unexpectedly, the pandemic also brought extraordinary opportunities in the form of unanticipated funding, loosened regulations on the use of funds, and brand new project ideas from the State of California.

Since 2020, the County of Mendocino facilitated, or actively participated in, the following significant initiatives:

- ✓ The CoC approved HEAP funding for **new permanent housing projects for homeless households**. As the Administrative Entity for the CoC, County staff are responsible for administering funds and executing relevant contracts:
 - **Orr Creek Commons** in Ukiah – 20 units of housing for homeless individuals experiencing severe mental illness. Opened in summer of 2022.
 - **The Plateau** in Fort Bragg – 20 units of permanent supportive housing for homeless households. Opened in fall of 2022.
- ✓ Mendocino County purchased the Best Western Inn in Ukiah under Round 1 of **Project Homekey** in November 2020. The building re-opened as **Live Oak Apartments**, with 48 units of housing for households experiencing homelessness, in April 2021. More information is available at www.projecthomekeymendocino.org
- ✓ **Project Roomkey**, with financial support from FEMA, sheltered hundreds of homeless County residents at risk of Covid-19 in local hotels. More than 50% of these participants exited the program to safe and secure housing.
- ✓ The County of Mendocino completed the drafting and implementation of a **Homeless Encampment Coordination Protocol** with the City of Ukiah.
- ✓ The County of Mendocino supported a new model for an **Extreme Winter Shelter** through a partnership with the City of Fort Bragg, the Fort Bragg Police Department, and Motel 6.

In addition to the flagship projects described above, **homeless services providers continued to provide shelter and services to homeless households throughout the pandemic**. Much of this work was sustained through an allocation of federal pandemic-specific funding through the Emergency Solutions Grant – Coronavirus.

CURRENT AND FUTURE PROJECTS

In 2023, the County and homeless services providers are focused on the following objectives, in addition to continuing to strengthen and support existing projects:

- ✓ A **Request for Proposals** will be released through standard County processes by early May. This RFP will largely follow the funding parameters established by the Homeless Housing Assistance Program (HHAP) and will seek community-based proposals for: rental assistance programs, operating subsidies for existing homelessness projects, outreach, homeless prevention, and shelter diversion.
- ✓ In March, County of Mendocino launched a new initiative, **Front Door for Families**, that focuses specifically on addressing homelessness experienced by families with children. The project was funded by a Family Homelessness Challenge Grant (one of only 10 grants distributed statewide.) More information can be found at www.frontdoormendocino.org

In addition to new funding sources and new projects related to homelessness, the Department of Social Services continues to accept, facilitate, and implement ongoing homelessness-related programs. These programs include:

- ✓ **Home Safe** – This program is targeted to elderly residents in need of housing support to gain housing or stay housed.
- ✓ **Homeless Disability Assistance Program (HDAP)** – This program is targeted to persons with disabilities who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, and who not yet successfully enrolled in relevant Social Security benefit programs.
- ✓ **CalWorks Housing Support Program** – This program is targeted to households with children, eligible for CalWorks, and at-risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- ✓ **Temporary and Permanent Housing Assistance** – This program provides limited motel stays and direct financial assistance (through security deposits and one-time housing needs) to households with children experiencing homelessness.
- ✓ **Bringing Families Home** – This new program provides housing guidance and financial assistance to families involved with child welfare services and experiencing housing instability. The program is incorporated into the Front Door for Families project.

In the near future, the County anticipates the need to strategically focus on the following concepts:

- ✓ **New opportunities through CalAIM** to support homeless services:
CalAIM seeks to address the social determinants of health, including a focus on housing and homelessness, through new benefits for eligible Medi-Cal recipients including Enhanced Care Management and housing-related Community Supports. Successfully engaging in housing-related CalAIM programs will require considerable coordination and communication amongst local stakeholders, as well as Partnership HealthPlan.

- ✓ Additional **permanent housing for families with children:**
Over the past five years, new housing developments for people experiencing homelessness has largely focused on studio and 1-br units. The County recognizes that homeless families with children have limited opportunities to secure housing in these new developments, and that larger units are needed.
- ✓ Additional **housing options for persons experiencing severe mental illness:**
The State of California is focused on supporting new initiatives related to new housing, including tenancy sustaining support, for homeless persons experiencing severe mental illness. Together with community-based providers, County staff in the Behavioral Health Department are carefully monitoring new funding sources that may be appropriate avenues for adding to county-wide housing stock with a focus on those experiencing severe mental illness.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

The County of Mendocino, in close partnership with municipalities, local agencies, and community-based organizations, has made remarkable progress in the last five years in addressing homelessness and its impact on our community. Recent areas of improvement include:

- ✓ **New permanent housing developments** for all income levels have boosted overall housing supply in our county, particularly in the Ukiah Valley.
- ✓ **Collaboration between the Mendocino Homeless Services Continuum of Care (CoC) and the County is excellent** and well-functioning.
- ✓ Collaboration and **communication between County of Mendocino, local cities, and local law enforcement agencies** has improved considerably.
- ✓ Our local Homeless Management Information System (**HMIS**) **has significantly improved**, in both capacity and level of use, within the past five years.
- ✓ **New funding sources** are allowing homeless service providers, and the County, to experiment and explore new models of support for homeless households.

Our collective ability to address homelessness is impacted, however, by the following areas of challenge:

- ✓ Like the County, **local community-based organizations are struggling with capacity and workforce issues**. As a result, County staff and programs have had to absorb an increased level of direct service work.
- ✓ We have **limited tools to support homeless individuals that are characterized as “hardest to serve.”** Despite significant investments of time, energy, and resources, a certain percentage of homeless individuals on our streets are not making positive progress toward self-sufficiency and stability. In most of these cases, although not all, severe mental illness and/or substance use conditions are deeply impacting growth toward wellness.
- ✓ The County, and the CoC, **has not communicated effectively or proactively with the public, including our local media partners**, about progress and limitations in the area of homelessness. The lack of communication contributes to frustration on the part of the public, business owners, and stakeholders interested in understanding how progress is being made.
- ✓ We have **a limited ability to accurately quantify the impact of homelessness in our community**. Our annual Point-in-Time Count is an imperfect tool, at best, to describe the depth and scope of the problem, nor is the PIT Count an accurate tool to measure progress.

HOMELESSNESS FUNDING OVERVIEW

Over the past five years, the funding landscape for addressing homelessness has changed considerably. New funding sources, and increased allocations of long-standing funding sources, have enabled our County and community partners to expand and grow.

The following chart provides a birds-eye view of new and existing funding sources specifically designated for homelessness-related projects. This chart is not exhaustive, but does include the most significant new funding sources. This overview also does not include ongoing traditional Social Services Department programs described in “Current and Future Projects.”

Funding Source	Amount and Time Span	Status
Homeless Emergency Assistance Program (HEAP)	Approximately \$5 million. Issued in 2018. Must be spent by 2023.	Largely complete. Majority of funding supported The Plateau and Orr Creek II developments.
Emergency Solutions Grant- CV (ESG-CV)	Approximately \$5 million. Pandemic-specific. Must be complete by Sept 2023.	Funding supported homeless services during the pandemic. Could not be used for capital projects.
Homeless Housing Assistance and Prevention Program (HHAP)	Five rounds of funding authorized in the State Budget. Approximately \$7 million total with a spending timeline of 2020 through 2027.	Must be collaboratively allocated between the County and the CoC. Roughly 30% of this funding has been obligated. New RFP in the spring will seek proposals for HHAP projects. With a few specific exceptions, funds are not designed for capital projects.
Housing and Homelessness Incentive Program (HHIP)	Approximately \$5.4 million. Must be spent by the end of 2027.	Funds administered by Partnership HealthPlan. Specific uses for these funds are still in development. Very few of these funds have been obligated at this time.
Family Homelessness Challenge Grant	\$1 million. Must be spent by 2025.	Funds support Front Door for Families – with a focus on homeless families with children. Competitive grant. Mendocino County will be eligible for Round 2 in 2024.
Project Homekey – Round 1	Specific to the housing project. Funding was generally targeted at \$100,000 “per door.”	County was a successful recipient of Round 1 of Project Homekey in 2020. Funding supported the purchase of the Best Western Inn in Ukiah.

Please note that all of these grants have differing guidelines about the use of funds, differing requirements in terms of spending and obligation deadlines, and differing structures for reporting and fiscal management. Thus, a note of caution: **Simply compiling the total amounts of the awards will provide misleading, incomplete, and inaccurate information.** In addition, the cost of providing services varies dramatically. For example, new housing construction could have significant up-front costs, but lower long-term operating needs. Congregate sheltering is relatively expensive to provide in a safe and secure environment, and does not typically lead to high rates of transition to permanent housing. Nonetheless, sheltering is a critically important humanitarian and community service. Non-congregate sheltering (i.e. providing motel room shelter) is exceedingly expensive, but critical for specific situations involving high-priority populations.

CONCLUSION

In the past five years, the County of Mendocino, together with community partners and local agencies, has made significant progress in building collaborative and creative solutions to addressing homelessness in our county. We have much work still ahead. Resolution of homelessness requires commitment, dedication, communication and a willingness to participate from every stakeholder in our community – public, private, faith-based, and individual. The conditions that bring individuals and families to a state of housing instability are numerous and intertwined. Our solutions, in response, must be both complex and creative. We are up to the challenge.

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