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SUMMARY OF IMPLEMENTATION WORK GROUP ACTIVITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prepared for County of Santa Cruz by Focus Strategies

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BACKGROUND

In October 2019, Focus Strategies provided a Baseline System Assessment with initial implementation steps that homeless system leadership and stakeholders in Santa Cruz County can take to improve the community's homeless crisis response. These recommendations were focused on short-term improvements that could be implemented while Focus Strategies continued to support longer-term planning work. In late 2019 and early 2020, four work groups were convened to begin implementing these recommendations. This document provides a summary of the work group results and recommendations.

The four work groups were:

1. Systemwide diversion and Coordinated Entry (CE) refinement
2. Housing-focused emergency shelter
3. Outreach services
4. Governance, planning and communications

A. Systemwide Diversion and Coordinated Entry (CE) Refinement

Need Identified: The Focus Strategies Baseline Assessment Report identified a need for a systemwide diversion/problem solving practice to provide people seeking assistance from the homeless system with immediate practical assistance to identify housing solutions and reduce the need for people to use emergency shelters and other homeless assistance programs. A complimentary need was identified to refine Smart Path, the local Coordinated Entry (CE) system, to more effectively prioritize people with the greatest need for housing assistance.

Purpose of Work Group: To develop an implementation plan to provide diversion/problem solving practices systemwide, in conjunction with refinements to Smart Path processes and policies. The purpose of diversion is to help people who are seeking shelter or other homeless services to remain housed or identify an alternative housing solution outside of the homeless response system. Diversion is also sometimes called Problem Solving or Rapid Resolution.

Convener/Facilitator: Human Services Department (HSD) Smart Path Team (convenor) & Focus Strategies (content expert and Facilitation support).



Participants: Staff from HSD Smart Path, Veterans Resource Center (VRC), and Housing Matters.

Summary of Work Conducted: This group held seven meetings between September 2019 and January 2020. The group produced a design for systemwide diversion and accompanying changes to Smart Path to create a more streamlined process that is more effective at supporting those with the highest needs to secure housing assistance, while providing diversion to those with lower needs. On February 12, 2020, Focus Strategies facilitated two workshops: (1) a training to introduce diversion to interested providers and other stakeholders, (2) a design session to present and receive feedback on the proposal for implementing diversion and associated changes to Smart Path. Both sessions were well-attended; participants were very engaged and provided thoughtful input.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Action Plan:

The proposed design for systemwide diversion is documented in a draft proposal completed in February 2020. Highlights of the proposal, that will inform the Three-Year Action Plan, include recommendations to:

1. Integrate diversion into the Smart Path process by offering a diversion conversation to each homeless household seeking assistance from the homeless system.
2. Offer diversion prior to conducting the Smart Path assessment, with the goal that households identify a housing solution outside the homeless system and the number of people waiting for a housing referral is reduced.
3. Train existing Smart Path Assessors to conduct strengths-based diversion conversations.
4. Reduce the number of Smart Path Assessors and provide more robust initial and ongoing training and support to ensure fidelity to best practices, including an ongoing peer learning collaborative.
5. Develop a pool of flexible funding that can be used to help implement housing solutions as part of the diversion process (small amounts of one-time assistance, such as for move-in costs or to help defray a debt that will allow a person to move back in with a friend or family member).
6. Implement an “inventory-based” prioritization process for Smart Path referrals that more efficiently identifies households with the greatest needs and provides swifter access to rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing available through the homeless crisis response system.



Diversion data will be collected as part of the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Key performance measures will be established and tracked, including:

- Percentage of people who receive a diversion conversation who are successfully diverted. Based on data from other communities, this will likely be higher for families than for adults.
- Time from diversion conversation to time the housing resolution plan is successfully implemented.
- Rate of return to homelessness for people successfully diverted.

Implications/Impact of COVID-19 on this Work Area

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a number of implications for and impacts on this work:

- As more people in the Santa Cruz community experience financial hardship and difficulty paying rent, there will be increasing pressure on the homeless system to assist people who are on the verge of homelessness. Implementing systemwide diversion will be critical to helping many of these households identify housing solutions and prevent an increase in the rate of entry into shelter.
- The emergency shelter system in Santa Cruz County has expanded rapidly in response to COVID-19, with several new facilities established for isolation and quarantine as well as to help reduce the capacity of existing shelters so that they can maintain safe social distancing among residents and provide a safe place for persons living unsheltered to stay. To manage access into the rapidly changing shelter inventory, HSD has established a coordinated referral process that centralizes assessment and placement of unsheltered persons into shelter beds. This new process presents an opportunity to link persons to systemwide diversion strategies to help some of these individuals identify an immediate and safe housing solution that will either prevent entrance to the shelter system or minimize the number of days they spend in shelter.
- Homeward Bound is being incorporated as a diversion tool and problem solving element of the coordinated care pilot initiated by the Shelter and Care DOC.

B. Housing-Focused Emergency Shelter

Need Identified: The Baseline Assessment identified existing emergency shelters in Santa Cruz County as having very uneven availability of services and supports to assist residents to obtain housing. Some shelters had services in place to support clients to develop housing plans or provide case management, but many did not and there is not a consistent practice in



place across the system, nor sufficient resources available to facilitate increased and more rapid movement of people out of shelters and into housing.

Purpose of Work Group: To assess current emergency shelter policies, practices and resources that support residents to secure housing, identify what is working and where there are gaps, and develop recommendations for system-wide changes at all shelters that will increase the rate at which residents are exiting shelter into housing.

Convener/Co-Facilitators: County of Santa Cruz Homeless Services Coordination Office (HSCO) and Housing Matters; Focus Strategies (content expert and facilitation support).

Participants: Regular participation included representatives from the following shelter organizations: Association of Faith Communities of Santa Cruz (AFC), Encompass Community Services, Front Street, Inc., Housing Matters, Monarch Services, New Life Community Services, Pajaro Valley Shelter Services, Siena House, and The Salvation Army. Many organizations had multiple staff participating, particularly if they operate multiple shelters. This group had representation of staff from nearly all emergency shelters in the community.

Summary of Work Conducted: This group held five meetings between October 2019 and January 2020. They created an inventory of practices, policies, and resources that shelters have available to help residents secure housing (including results of a survey completed by 100% of participating agencies) and identified gaps in what they are able to offer. Building off this information gathering, the group developed a list of potential solutions that could help shelters better support residents to have successful housing outcomes. In early December, Focus Strategies conducted three focus groups with people currently living in emergency shelter, to solicit feedback on the needs and the potentials solutions identified by the working group. Input from the focus groups was then used to refine the proposed solutions.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Action Plan:

Based on their own work and feedback from shelter participant focus groups, the work group recommends three categories of expansion and resources in the system to increase the focus on movement to housing from shelters and to facilitate more and faster movement to housing.

1. Expand availability of housing-focused case management/advocacy for people staying in shelters; this could be through expansion of dedicated staff within shelters,



increased community-based case management that can serve people within shelters, or a combination of these approaches.

2. Make available flexible funding to help residents leave shelter to housing; including funds for short-term rental assistance and other more flexible expenditures that can be used to support a housing resolution. Funding should be made available in a way that ensures that shelter participants have equal access to this support regardless of the shelter they are staying in, and considerations for a funding pool should be considered.
3. Provide capacity building and training for staff working in shelters to support housing movement, either as primary advocates and/or in support of the case manager/advocates assigned to work with shelter guests.

Implications/Impact of COVID-19 on this work area

- The County is currently developing a system-wide coordinated care pilot that focuses on case management, housing navigation, and rental assistance for participants in shelters. The model is being tested amongst a small sample of shelters and will be scaled to the entire system after it has been refined.
- The County is currently looking at ways to set up a flexible pool of assistance that can be used to support immediate housing exits from both existing and expanded shelters and for those who are in non-congregate settings (hotels) during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Initial efforts at capacity building and training for staff have begun during the County's emergency response to COVID-19. Shelter staff have been provided training on mental health first aid and technical assistance on operations during a weekly Shelter Provider Call.

C. Outreach Services

Need Identified: The Baseline assessment identified that Santa Cruz has a number of entities conducting outreach to unsheltered people but there was no formal coordination of these efforts, agreed upon goals, shared protocols, consistent data collection, or common outcome measures. It also found that the community lacks a proactive strategy for addressing encampments and unsheltered homelessness as part of a systematic response to homelessness. The longer-term strategy on unsheltered homelessness was deferred for the upcoming Strategic Action Plan but shorter term action was recommended to ensure



outreach is efficiently deployed and connected to the rest of the system, and to lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive approach to unsheltered homelessness.

Purpose of Work: Understand existing outreach efforts, identify gaps and duplication, and develop recommendations to better coordinate and standardize outreach efforts.

Co-Convener/Facilitators: County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency (HSA) and HSCO; Focus Strategies (content experts and facilitators).

Participants: Representation varied across meetings but included staff from the majority of outreach efforts in the community, including those funded by the County and City of Santa Cruz, non-profit, and grassroots efforts.

Summary of Work Conducted: An initial large convening took place in late November 2019, attended by over 40 staff representing a broad range of outreach teams operating within Santa Cruz County. The attendees shared information about how they each approach outreach, brainstormed what could make outreach more effective, and identified training needs. A smaller group was formed and met three times between January and March 2020 to continue to explore opportunities for better definition of outreach, greater coordination, development of shared standards, and discussion of outreach goals and measurement.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Action Plan:

1. The group has prioritized developing a set of quality standards to define and standardize the purpose of outreach, skills outreach workers should have, and what services the outreach teams should be equipped to provide.
2. The group also discussed the need for better data and information sharing about program availability and for some common outcome measurements.
3. The group also identified many gaps in the system that impact the ability to connect unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness to shelter and housing-focused services. They specifically identified the need for lower-barrier shelter and more case management services and housing; these needs will be addressed in other parts of the Strategic Action Plan.



Implications/Impact of COVID-19 on this work area

- With the advent of COVID-19, significant action has been taken to align and rapidly deploy expanded outreach services, especially across HSA and HSD, to provide education about COVID-19, address health needs, support physical distancing, and help meet immediate survival needs. The experience from this rapid alignment effort has been positive for increasing coordination and efficacy of outreach, providing a platform to build on.
- A work group has convened to develop a plan for outreach teams to collect basic information and COVID-19 data to be entered into HMIS.
- The resources available to respond to the epidemic (expanded shelter beds, including Project RoomKey beds, safe camping supplies, etc.) have made outreach and engagement much more productive. Outreach efforts are now better integrated with a coordinated shelter referral process.

D. Governance, Planning and Communication

Need Identified: The Focus Strategies Baseline Assessment Report identified a need for a more robust system-wide alignment around priorities and goals, capacity for data-driven decision making, and a more refined and empowered governance and implementation structure. The report also noted that this aligned system will need increased staffing capacity to support the system structure and see goals to fruition. Without these elements in place Santa Cruz cannot be said to have a fully realized homeless crisis response system in which all the parts work together toward a common set of measurable goals; without such a system, progress on reducing homelessness will remain elusive.

Purpose of Work Group: The Governance work group was tasked with developing a proposed plan to create a systemwide governance body that will design, direct, and evaluate the response to homelessness in Santa Cruz County, including a proposed scope for its decision-making (what the body would have purview over), structure, and decision-making and input processes. The work was informed by the work of the Governance Study Committee that convened in 2017.

Convener/Facilitator: HSCO (convener) and Focus Strategies (content expert and facilitation support).



Participants: Representatives from: City of Santa Cruz, City of Scotts Valley, City of Watsonville, Housing Matters, Applied Survey Research, Smart Solutions, and County of Santa Cruz (HSD, HSA, County Administrative Office, and Board of Supervisors staff)

Summary of Work Conducted: This group held seven meetings between November 2019 and March 2020. The group has drafted a proposal for a new Governance Entity and had begun the process of presenting the proposal to key stakeholders at the time the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Strategic Action Plan

The primary recommendations of the governance work group are:

1. to establish a governance structure to design, direct, and evaluate an effective regional homelessness response system;
2. empower the new governance structure to set investment priorities informed by data and allocate funding to maximize results, and;
3. authorize the new structure to take input, make decisions, hold accountability, and communicate about the regional homelessness response.

The group is proposing a revised governance structure that will guide the region towards a more effective response to homelessness, moving away from reactive decision making and towards forward thinking, systematic improvements and investments. The group recommends that a Charter for the new structure be adopted in 2020, with a process for standing up the new structure developed and integrated into the Strategic Action Plan.

The proposed new structure will consist of:

- A Regional Homelessness Response Commission - a multi-jurisdictional body holding *authority and accountability* for regional homelessness response; setting overall policy; establishing priorities and making funding decisions; setting performance targets and evaluating results; and engaging the community.
- A Community and Technical Advisory Committee (CTAC) - that *guides implementation* of regional homelessness response by making recommendations to the Commission on system design, program operations, communications with the community, data collection and evaluation. The CTAC will include people with lived experience; service providers; partner systems; business sector; community



organizations; faith community; advocates; neighborhood groups, and the general public. It will also oversee task groups working on specific topics.

- Robust County staffing and support, in coordination with staff from Cities, will be required for this structure to be effective.

Implications/Impact of COVID-19 on this work area

- In an effort to provide stronger administrative support and coordinate County-wide efforts, the HSCO, which oversees policy design will merge with the Housing Unit at HSD to create a new Division that includes policy, program oversight, evaluation, contract development, and fiscal management. The projected start date for this Division is October 2020 and in anticipation of that merge, staff from HSCO and HSD began to collaborate on joint projects that will carry into the new division.

