



# CONFRONTING HOMELESSNESS IN MCHENRY COUNTY

Strategic Plan to  
End Homelessness 2016-2018

December 2015

# Report Information

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The Social IMPACT Research Center thanks members of the Continuum of Care in McHenry County for all of the time and thoughtfulness they put into this planning process and plan development.

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**Suggested Citation:** Rynell, A., & Terpstra, A. (2015, December). *Confronting Homelessness in McHenry County*. Chicago: Social IMPACT Research Center.

This report was made possible by the generous support of the McHenry County Mental Health Board and the McHenry County Department of Planning and Development, Community Development Division.

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# CONTEXT AND SYSTEM VISION

All individuals and families facing homelessness in McHenry County should have access to safe, decent, affordable housing and the resources and supports needed to sustain it. Residents of McHenry County are facing a number of challenges that put them at risk of homelessness:

- One in five McHenry County households are paying over half their income on rent, making their housing situations unstable.
- Over 6,000 McHenry County residents live in extreme poverty, with annual incomes below half the poverty line (less than \$10,000 for a family of 3).
- Median rent in McHenry County is nearly \$1,050—unaffordable for most low-wage workers.

These drivers help create a situation in which an estimated 167 McHenry County residents are homeless on any given night and 625 residents experience homelessness in the course of a year, 28 percent of whom are children.

In order to respond to local needs and to reach the goal of ending homelessness, McHenry County's homeless system needs to evolve beyond a collection of great individual programs to a coordinated crisis response system that makes strategic, data-driven decisions. To this end, the McHenry County Continuum of Care has spent 2015 engaged in a process to create a plan to end homelessness for McHenry County.

The inception of this plan came from multiple drivers:

- A strong community commitment to ending homelessness;
- A nationwide push to develop local plans to address homelessness;
- The reality of needing to meet performance measures expected by HUD, the major funder of homeless housing in McHenry County (see HEARTH Act performance measures sidebar on page 4);
- A need for intentionality around who is prioritized for which housing types so resources are used in a maximal way to end homelessness;
- A desire to operate like a system versus independent providers not fully aligned in an optimal way;
- A push to determine if McHenry County has the right mix of housing and services to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness and to identify the pieces of the solution that are missing;
- The need for policy and process shifts focused on screening people into the system versus screening people out; and
- A drive to improve experiences for people in need in McHenry County.

## MCHENRY COUNTY CONTINUUM OF CARE

The mission of the McHenry County Continuum of Care to End Homelessness is to work together to end homelessness in McHenry County.

Membership of the Continuum includes consumers of services, government entities, nonprofits, and private sector representatives.

The purpose of the Continuum is to assist in the coordination and development of services and housing for homeless and low-income persons with housing needs through planning, education, and advocacy.

For more information, please visit their [website](#).

# HEARTH ACT PERFORMANCE MEASURES

The length of time individuals and families remain homeless.

Reduction in the number of people who become homeless for the first time.

The extent to which persons who leave homelessness experience additional spells of homelessness.

Overall reduction in the number of people experiencing homelessness.

Jobs and income growth for people experiencing homelessness.

Thoroughness in reaching people experiencing homelessness throughout a geographic region.

The following methods were used to create the plan:

1. Background research on strategic plans and plans to end homelessness in other geographies across the country; on the HEARTH Act and related HUD materials; and on literature on best practices in the homeless field.
2. System and needs assessment based on the Consolidated Plan, Continuum of Care applications, and existing data from the American Community Survey, HMIS, HUD reports, and other relevant data sources.
3. Strategic planning sessions with Continuum of Care members, providers, and other stakeholders on topics relevant to plan components. Themes for the three sessions were as follows: System Visioning; Digging Deep—Homeless Population and System Priorities; and Getting Things Done—Operationalization of the Plan.
4. An unmet needs analysis that assessed the need for different types of housing assistance compared to the supply of each type of housing assistance to illuminate gaps.

This report captures McHenry County’s plan and the work ahead.

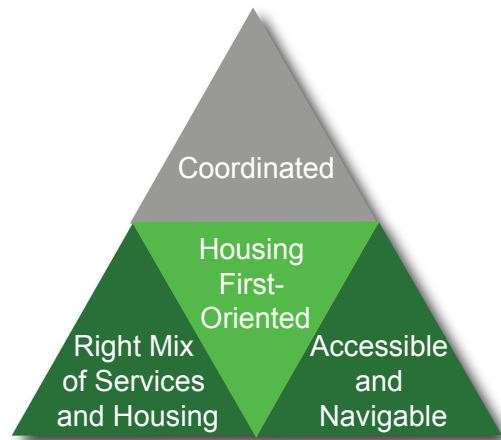
## SYSTEM VISION

Systems are often big and complicated. Think about the health care system, education system, or criminal justice system. Systems such as these can be hard to navigate, time-consuming, and frustrating. Through the process used to create this plan stakeholders identified the following as attributes they do NOT want to represent the homeless system and ones that should.

Homeless system should NOT be:	Homeless system SHOULD be:
Inefficient and time consuming	Responsive and efficient
Bureaucratic and inflexible	Supportive and welcoming
Confusing and difficult to use	Transparent and navigable
Inequitable and inadequate	Coordinated and linked
Unfriendly and frustrating	Sufficient relative to need
Exhausting and overwhelming	Respectful and accountable

The resulting vision is a McHenry County homeless system that will:

- Be a coordinated system with real-time housing inventory information, effective referrals, and no cracks;
- Have a mix of housing and services and supply that are aligned with needs – i.e. person-centered, not program or agency centered;
- Have housing first principles and policies embedded throughout the system—meaning programs are client ready versus participants being housing ready and that people are screened in versus screened out; and
- Be a system that is easily understood, accessed, and navigated by people experiencing homelessness.



Stakeholders will know if this vision is realized if the following results are achieved:

- Homelessness is rare (numbers of people experiencing homelessness decrease and numbers for whom homelessness is prevented increase)
- Homelessness is non-recurring (returns to homelessness decline)
- Homelessness is brief (length of time spent homeless declines or is measured relative to a benchmark)

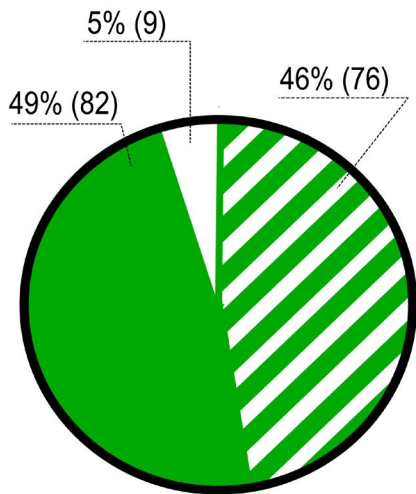


This comprehensive vision and set of outcomes are well aligned with best practices being implemented across the nation, tying McHenry County’s fight to end homelessness to the larger national movement. There is considerable momentum around these goals and significant progress being made in diverse communities across the U.S.

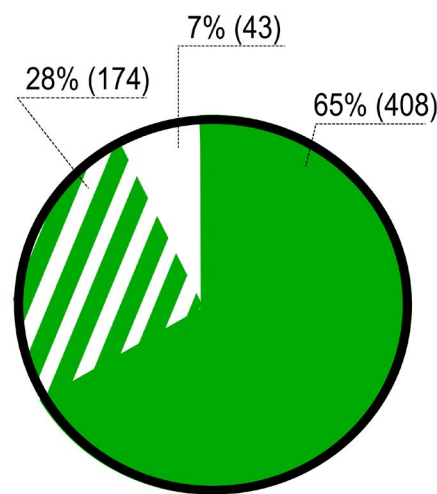
This new plan for McHenry County embodies strategic thinking around targeting resources to those most in need and likely to benefit through coordinated assessment; integrates and promotes best practices across housing and service interventions; and it identifies new partners, in new areas, to help seize critical opportunities and to leverage more support for the homeless system.

# SPOTLIGHT: HOMELESS SYSTEM

## HOMELESSNESS



POINT IN TIME (167)



ANNUAL (625)

### CHARACTERISTICS OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESS

	Number	Share
Substance use	70	11.2%
Mental illness	119	19.0%
Veterans*	51	12.5%
Domestic violence*	93	22.8%
Chronic health condition	20	3.2%
Disability	48	7.7%

\*adults only

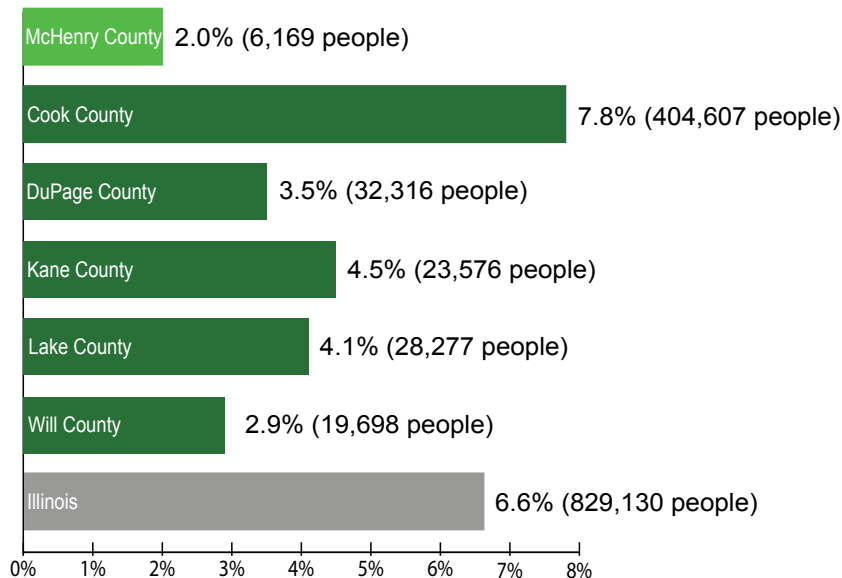
### PRIOR LIVING SITUATION

	Number	Share of Adults
Already in system	97	24%
Institutional setting	43	11%
Unsubsidized rental or own	45	11%
With family or friends	140	34%
Hotel or motel	11	3%
Subsidized housing	9	2%
Place not meant for habitation	48	12%
Other	8	2%
Don't know or missing	7	2%

Source: McHenry County Continuum of Care documentation.

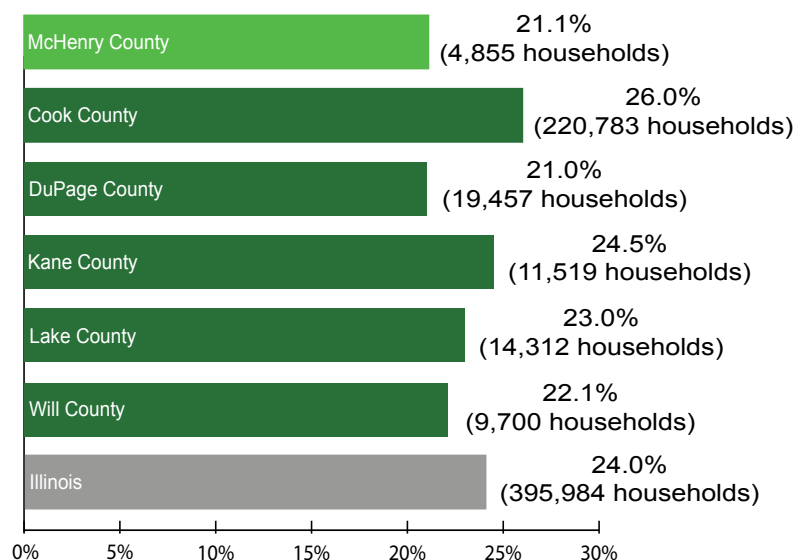
# SPOTLIGHT: LOCAL REALITIES

## EXTREME POVERTY



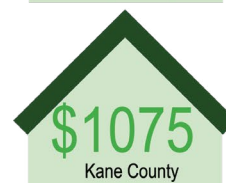
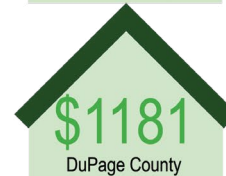
Extreme poverty: annual income below 50 percent of the federal poverty threshold

## EXTREME RENT-BURDENED HOUSEHOLDS



Extreme rent burden: 50 percent or more of income spent on housing costs

## MEDIAN RENT FOR ANY SIZE UNIT





# PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT 3 YEARS

McHenry County's priorities for the coming years are highlighted on the following pages and are organized into three broad categories—housing, services, and system operations.



Housing is the cornerstone of McHenry County's efforts to end homelessness. McHenry County is committed to supporting a variety of housing interventions, improving the targeting of each housing type to the populations most likely to benefit, improving processes, applying best practices, and integrating housing first. To help inform this effort, an unmet housing needs analysis was conducted. The analysis involved comparing the supply of different forms of housing assistance to the estimated need for each type of housing. The results reveal how the housing assistance landscape in McHenry County should be calibrated or right sized to best meet the needs of residents. The housing targets contained in the sections below come from the unmet needs analysis.

## Emergency Shelter

Emergency shelters in McHenry County are largely operated on a seasonal basis in the colder months, hosted in rotating locations at congregations, and staffed primarily through volunteers. Many are in church facilities poorly equipped to serve as shelter, and there are many months—May through September—when there is no general population shelter option at all. Transition-aged youth (ages 18-24) are mixed with adults in the shelters and are having poorer outcomes. These shelters operate within a funding and practice context that is moving away from shelters as a housing solution and with growing recognition that, for many people who end up in shelters, their homelessness could have been prevented in the first place. To respond to this context and to meet the goals of reducing how many people enter the homeless system and their length of stay, McHenry County will focus on the following goals:

- Divert emergency shelter stays whenever possible
- Explore a year-round, 24 hour/7 days per week, fixed-site shelter option for crisis housing that could also be a central point for service access
- Ensure there are low-demand housing options so all can be housed regardless of circumstances
- Assess operating policies and rules across programs that may push people back to shelter or serve as barriers to shelter entry in the first place
- Establish processes to reconnect people to permanent housing as quickly as possible
- Determine better housing options and models for unaccompanied and transition-aged youth
- Use data to track who is getting stuck in the shelter and who could have been diverted in the first place to help drive systems improvements

## Transitional Housing

### DEFINITIONS

**Emergency Shelter:** immediate, temporary housing for those experiencing a loss of housing and related crises.

**Transitional Housing:** up to 24 months of housing with support services, providing a period of stability to allow people to transition to and maintain permanent housing within 24 months of program entry.

**Rapid Re-Housing:** short- and/or medium-term rental assistance and limited supportive services, as needed, to help an individual or family that is homeless move as quickly as possible into permanent housing and achieve stability in that housing.

**Permanent Supportive Housing:** permanent housing with indefinite leasing or rental assistance paired with services to help homeless people with disabilities achieve housing stability.

Transitional housing is itself going through a transition across the nation. Through research and the emergence of newer housing and service models, it is becoming clearer that transitional housing should prioritize individuals and families going through transitional periods in their lives. Their service needs are acute but not indefinite. Examples include survivors of domestic violence, people in recovery or in treatment, people exiting incarceration, and youth. McHenry County has a history of transitional housing that has been effective and continues to evolve based on best practices including shorter length of stay and focused case management. In order to create the right mix of housing types for those within the homeless system and to promote housing stability and success, McHenry County will focus on the following goals:

- Prioritize transitional housing for survivors of domestic violence, people in recovery or in treatment, people exiting incarceration, and transition-aged youth
- Align number of units with need (those most likely to benefit from transitional housing), which might mean a reduction in units
- Remove barriers to entry into transitional housing
- Evolve program models to have more targeted services designed to help people achieve stability in employment and permanent housing
- Develop alternative funding and service models for transitional housing beyond HUD

## Rapid Re-Housing

Rapid re-housing, short- to medium-term rental assistance with limited services, is the newest player in terms of interventions on the housing continuum targeted at people experiencing homelessness. While it has many features similar to transitional housing, in rapid re-housing the assistance is temporary but the housing is meant to be permanent. Early evidence suggests this to be a promising tool in the fight to end homelessness. The rapid re-housing programs in McHenry County are fairly nascent, the current reach is small, and some people return to homelessness after being in the program. McHenry County will focus on the following goals to improve outcomes:

- Prioritize individuals with low to medium barriers to housing stability, families with children, and first-time homeless for rapid re-housing resources
- Improve coordination with services
- Seek opportunities to grow resources to provide at least 22 new rapid re-housing units
- Increase independent living supports, including adding more mentoring and volunteers

## Permanent Supportive Housing

Permanent supportive housing is broadly understood to effectively end homelessness for those with disabilities especially chronically homeless individuals and families. McHenry County has had trouble filling its permanent supportive housing units with chronically homeless because the nature of homelessness in the county frequently does not meet HUD's definition of chronic homelessness. There are other populations falling through the cracks of the system that might also benefit from supportive housing. McHenry County will focus on the following goals:

- Ensure that permanent supportive housing targets populations with intensive service needs who would not stay housed without supports, people with developmental disabilities, people with serious mental illness, and people who experience long-term homelessness
- Look beyond project-based supportive housing to develop community-based supportive housing units
- Create a pipeline out of supportive housing for those ready and able to live independently, which includes adding 60 new units
- Expand person-by-person transition action plans
- Increase independent living supports, including adding more mentoring and volunteers

## Affordable Housing

An adequate supply of affordable housing is essential for preventing and ending homelessness. While much affordable housing development happens outside of the formal purview and funding mechanisms of the homeless system, there are many creative ways for the homeless system to participate in and spur the new creation or set aside of affordable units. The Housing Authority can implement a homeless preference in housing voucher wait lists, and landlords could be asked to set aside units at lower rents. McHenry County plans to focus on the following affordable housing goals:

- Explore creating an inventory/database of affordable units
- Increase affordable housing availability in McHenry County especially for those with very low incomes
- Develop strong relationships with landlords
- Recruit some property owners to have a small percentage of units set aside for people experiencing homelessness
- Explore a homeless housing preference for Housing Authority vouchers
- Work with banks to repurpose bank-owned properties
- Develop mentorship program to work with higher-risk clients to maintain housing



While housing is the centerpiece of local responses to homelessness, success in housing and becoming stabilized is often a result of receiving needed services and supports. McHenry County is committed to improving and enhancing services within the homeless system such as street outreach, homelessness prevention, health care, and efforts to increase income for people experiencing homelessness.

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### Street Outreach

Street outreach focuses on finding people experiencing homelessness who might not know about housing or services available. It includes building relationships, monitoring well-being, assessing vulnerability, linking to services, and providing follow-up case management. Outreach is a critical first step in connecting people with the services they need and reducing the length of time they spend homeless. That being said, the rural nature of much of McHenry County makes outreach a challenge. It is further challenged by the limited resources available to support such services. McHenry County has been expanding outreach and will focus on the following goals:

- Increase geographic coverage of outreach team
- Increase coordination between agencies providing outreach and prevention services
- Identify ways for outreach staff to be using HMIS
- Increase outreach to jails and emergency rooms

### Mainstream Resources

The homeless system in isolation does not have the resources to prevent and end homelessness; mainstream government programs are a core partner in this effort. Mainstream programs are typically for low-income people, though they are not specifically targeted toward people experiencing homelessness. There are a variety of mainstream safety net programs to help people experiencing homelessness meet their basic needs such as TANF (cash assistance/welfare), SSI (disability), and SNAP (food stamps), among others. Unfortunately, people experiencing homelessness often encounter barriers to accessing those resources. In order to increase income and services received, homeless providers need to be equipped to help program participants enroll in mainstream programs. McHenry County will focus on the following goals:

- Ensure that line staff have the training, information, and support needed to connect participants efficiently to mainstream resources
- Ensure that everyone who enters the homeless system is linked to public benefits for which they are eligible
- Have more people in McHenry County trained in benefits application assistance, including disability benefits (SSI/SSDI) and other entitlements

## Homelessness Prevention

Homelessness prevention activities are designed to reduce the number of people who become homeless for the first time. Activities include short- or medium-term financial assistance and services as well as tenant and legal services. In addition, it includes systems prevention efforts with institutions that may discharge people into homelessness. A newly emerging area of prevention work is identifying the situations that make a person most likely to become homeless and intentionally targeting households with those situations. This reinforces the importance of assessment in the process. McHenry County is committed to preventing homelessness whenever possible through a number of avenues and will focus on the following goals:

- Raise more flexible funds for prevention financial assistance to serve those not qualified for government resources
- Expand homelessness prevention activities beyond financial assistance to reduce the number of individuals and families who become homeless
- Work with Treasurer's Office to reach out to those with property taxes in arrears
- Change policies so seniors do not become homeless as a result of unpaid property taxes
- Identify homeless feeder systems—those places that might release people from their system into community including foster care, healthcare agencies, and local correctional facilities
- Establish close relationships, exit plans, and processes with those feeder systems to ensure that people do not become homeless upon discharge from those systems
- Work with the bar association, Prairie State Legal Services, and banks to provide counseling for pending foreclosures facing eviction
- Work with the Consumer Credit Counseling Service to provide credit counseling to financially distressed households
- Work more closely with law enforcement to learn what they see and need
- Launch marketing/PR plan about what to do, who to call, how to help if someone is at risk of becoming homeless

## Health Care

Poor health and chronic health conditions are frequent contributors to homelessness, and behavioral health issues are commonly found among people experiencing homelessness. The Affordable Care Act provides for a Medicaid expansion to nearly all individuals with incomes up to 138% of the federal poverty level, and Medicaid enrollment processes have been streamlined. Given their low incomes and high uninsured rate, individuals experiencing homelessness could significantly benefit from this coverage expansion. However, it will be important to address the barriers they face to enrolling in coverage and accessing needed care. In addition, Medicaid funds may be available to support some services for people experiencing homelessness in new ways. McHenry County will focus on the following health care goals:

- Enroll all people in the McHenry County homeless system into Medicaid or other health insurance
- Create a list of medical providers outlining what types of insurance they accept
- Educate homeless service providers about the available health care resources
- Educate and involve Centegra, Mercy, and Advocate in the Continuum of Care
- Encourage the provision of comprehensive health supports to people experiencing homelessness—physical, mental and oral
- Consider having a primary care physician stationed at the emergency rooms where many people experiencing homelessness go for care
- Elevate the importance and practices of preventive health care throughout the homeless system
- Ensure training in trauma-informed care for staff throughout the homeless system and services for those overcoming trauma
- Integrate harm reduction practices in homeless and health care services
- Encourage expansion of behavioral health services to serve more in need in the county

## Employment

Linking individuals and families with stable earned income from employment is a critical tool in the fight to prevent and end homelessness. One of the HEARTH Act performance measures, jobs and income growth for people experiencing homelessness, brings attention to the importance of employment as a solution within homeless systems. Providers serving people experiencing homelessness can play a role in connecting individuals with employment opportunities and should be aware of the service models and strategies that are most effective in serving this population. McHenry County will focus on the following employment goals:

- Re-engage the workforce board as an active partner of the Continuum of Care
- Increase awareness about existing employment-related resources locally through the workforce board, McHenry County College, the Migrant Council, and local unions
- Use the Illinois Workforce Network and the Volunteer Center for job shadowing, resumé writing, and interview preparation
- Develop provider knowledge and skills in best practices in employment programs for people experiencing homelessness
- Promote changes in government policies to support employment programs and policies for people experiencing homelessness
- Become more engaged with the McHenry County Economic Development Commission and Small Business Development Center to learn about program opportunities as well as employer needs
- Educate employers on homelessness and hiring incentives for certain groups
- Seek out innovative transportation solutions by partnering with PACE, McHenry County Department of Transportation, local funders, Dial-a-Ride, and the Senior Grant Commission
- Formalize relationship with Willow Creek car repair ministry



It is no small feat to coordinate and manage all of the moving parts of a local homeless system. HUD has issued new guidance to help local homeless systems build needed capacity and institute system improvements. The ultimate goal is to make it as easy as possible for people experiencing homelessness to get matched up quickly and effectively to the services and housing they need. For the homeless system this means developing a coordinated assessment and referral process, formalizing governance, and continuing to build the functionality and success of the homeless management information system.

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## Coordinated Assessment

Coordinated intake and assessment can be a powerful tool for making rapid, effective, and consistent matches of people in need to housing and services regardless of their location within a geographic area. McHenry County must create a coordinated process to identify the needs of all individuals and families seeking housing or services and to better match them with assistance to meet their needs and preferences. McHenry County has adopted a ‘no wrong door’ approach and will focus on the following goals:

- Establish a central intake point that is accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days per week
- Build out additional, easily accessible entry points at service providers into the homeless system
- Continue to negotiate utilizing the crisis line as one of the homeless system entry points
- Launch use of a standardized triage and assessment tool in the McHenry County homeless system that helps determine the most appropriate next step and intervention
- Establish referral parameters, written standards for who gets what intervention, and develop a referral process for the homeless system that is effective, accurate, consistent, and participatory
- Lay out a marketing plan to advertise and educate about where to go/who to call in a crisis, including 211 and the crisis line
- Train staff periodically on the tools and referral processes
- Explore use of HMIS in housing a real-time inventory of housing and services for referrals and service matches
- Maintain an accurate and comprehensive community resource directory
- Explore use of HMIS to house key eligibility documents
- Explore creation of system navigators/trained advocates/care coordinators
- Develop a diversion component to add to the system to prevent homelessness
- Monitor progress of coordinated assessment system on a periodic basis to ensure clients who need services can access them



## Operational Capacity

Implementation of this ambitious plan requires a renewed assessment of organizational capacity and operations. McHenry County will focus on the following goals to improve Continuum of Care capacity to implement the plan:

- Seek funds beyond traditional HUD support to operate a more optimal, responsive system and provide additional supportive services
- Coordinate with other government funding sources including other county resources, Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Runaway and Homeless Youth, Head Start, and other housing and service programs funded through Federal, State, or local government resources
- Develop a larger community volunteer pool, including mentors
- Develop intentional community education opportunities including an active website, newsletters, and events
- Plan periodic training series to align services with best and emerging practices such as harm reduction and housing first trainings

## Leadership & Governance

The McHenry County Continuum of Care has opportunities to rethink its leadership, lead applicant organization and refresh its governance charter to align with this plan to end homelessness and HUD's priorities. To this end, McHenry County will focus on the following goals:

- Explore requesting HUD technical assistance for moving forth with the following organizational structure action steps
- Determine who should be the lead HUD applicant based on capacity to manage fiscal responsibility and sufficient staff for administration
- Engage in a strategic process to determine if the Continuum of Care should become a 501(c)3 with independent leadership
- Determine the best structure for the Continuum of Care including committees, liaisons to other stakeholders, and having a clear coordinator
- Establish a process to identify consistently low-performing projects, and develop protocols to improve the performance of those projects
- Continue to grow and engage stakeholders including non HUD-funded service agencies, people experiencing homelessness, police, emergency room staff, religious groups, and businesses
- Host meetings at accessible times and locations for people experiencing homelessness
- Evaluate roles/responsibilities for Continuum of Care members annually
- Engage elected officials in the plan to end homelessness to leverage their support and leadership to move it forward

## Measuring Progress

McHenry County has made good progress in implementation of its Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Moving forward, data from the system should increasingly be used to inform different types of decision-making and progress of the plan to end homelessness. McHenry County will focus on the following goals:

- Use point-in-time count process and information to inform planning, which may include adding questions to the survey
- Identify and recruit more agencies to use HMIS
- Assess accuracy of HMIS data system-wide on a monthly basis
- Use data to identify and quantify housing and service gaps and any areas that have excess capacity
- Track progress on meeting HUD's new systems-level performance measures
- Set benchmarks and use data to track outcomes for strategic planning purposes at least quarterly
- Create and implement a plan to facilitate inter-agency care plan coordination for people with very high barriers to housing stability
- Consider tracking related outcomes such as health outcomes (ER, hospital visits) and arrest numbers (vagrancy, disorderly trespass, breaking and entering)
- Devise a process to capture consumer input about what's working, what's not, and what they need
- Annually engage in a review of progress, and retool the plan to end homelessness as needed

# CONCLUSION

McHenry County has put forth a thoughtful and responsive strategic plan to end homelessness. It accounts for local realities while taking on important new challenges and priorities. *Growing homeless prevention and diversion opportunities. Aligning housing capacity and types with population needs. Creating pathways for successful exits from supportive and transitional housing.* These are bold goals, but in line with best practices and are needed to end homelessness.

Beyond these specific interventions, McHenry County is committed to building out a *coordinated entry process* so that the homeless system is easily understood, accessed, and navigated by people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and so that it matches people efficiently and effectively to appropriate housing and services.

This new plan also identifies *new partners*, in new areas, to help seize critical opportunities and to leverage more support for the homeless system. Important partnerships include the health care system, workforce system, and mainstream government programs.

Finally, implementation of this ambitious plan requires *new resources*, a renewed *assessment of the leadership and governance structure* of the homeless system, and a *commitment to measuring progress and retooling* when necessary.

So while the road ahead includes a lot of hard work, tough decision-making, and new ways of doing business, the ultimate outcome will be worth it for people experiencing homelessness in McHenry County—homelessness that is rare, non-recurring, and brief.

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