

The Human Services Committee
February 22, 2024

Presented by Heidi Lacey

Executive Director

Charter House Coalition

For the record I am Heidi Lacey, the Executive Director of Charter House Coalition, (CHC), a low barrier shelter located in Middlebury. We are 1 of 2 emergency shelters in Addison County. Our county shelter capacity is 55 beds every night and CHC offers up to 7 additional beds on a night-by-night basis to community members that do not have stable shelter and that would otherwise be outside.

- CHC is the lead agency for Addison County. I will provide a quick overview of what a Lead Agency is momentarily.
- CHC provides, shelter, street outreach throughout ALL of Addison County, offers a free meal program and has expanded case management services through HOP funding to support housing assessment. We providing client centered and essential services.
- CHC also administers financial assistance for at risk households through HOP Diversion and Rapid Exit funding.
- Our annual budget is financed at roughly 68% by OEO through HOP and ERAP grants.

- During our time today I will share the followings:
- A brief overview of Coordinated Entry (CE) – what it is, who administers it and how it effects our work as a State.
- Three recommendations while we consider the fate of 100’s if not 1000’s of Vermonters:
 1. Encourage and support ESD in obtaining user licenses for the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) which is the *already established and* official system of record used for reporting purposes by DCF and OEO.
 2. I will recommend that the proposed modifications to *who and how* General Assistance Transitional and Emergency housing is administered be further postponed to avoid adding burden to each local community. The proposal as it is written is for financial “balancing” and is only a band-aid approach. We must leave GA Administration with DCF/OEO until we establish tangible, (bricks and mortar) affordable housing.
 3. I will recommend fewer restrictions on eligibility for all GA housing programs. Eligibility through the program currently contradicts how HUD defines categories of homelessness. GA eligibility guidelines need to better align with how HUD categorizes the unhoused. Complexities such as disability verification, medical conditions and length of stay need to each be reconsidered.

What is a Balance of State Continuum of Care Lead Agency

CHC is the lead agency for Addison County and is part of a statewide network. One of eleven lead agency organizations, referred to the Balance of State Continuum of Care. Chittenden County is one of two Continuum of Care groups within VT; both utilize the state used software Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The system is established to coordinate care across services intended for persons experiencing homelessness. There is even a mechanism to monitor those that are at-risk of becoming unhoused.

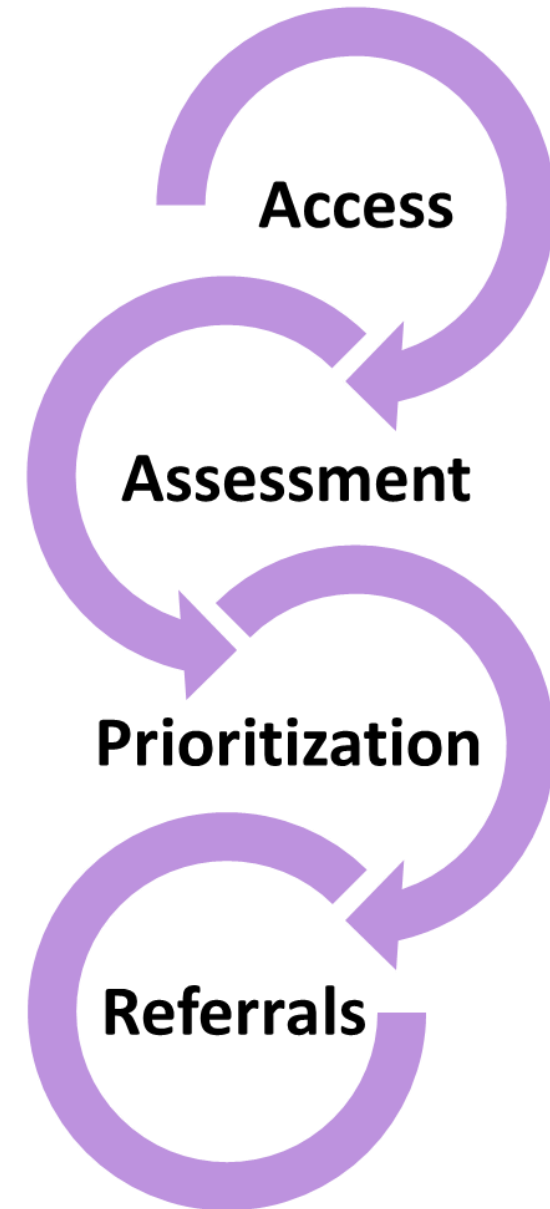
In Addison County, Charter House partners with 13-17 assessment partners, each with their own licenses to enter and access data in the HMIS system. Additionally, the lead agency acts as the front door to services. Provide example of myself being unhoused and how I might identify help.

Representatives from each org meet weekly to maintain coordination of care and services. Additionally, representatives meet monthly to discuss housing challenges and victories on a local and state level. Numerous other meetings are held by lead agency members and who are consistently supported by OEO. There is a Lead Agency group as well as a CE Committee that meets several times a month to improve process, interpret HUD requirements and to make recommendations to implement coordinated care across the state. Our aim is to provide a consistent system to better serve persons experiencing trauma and homelessness.

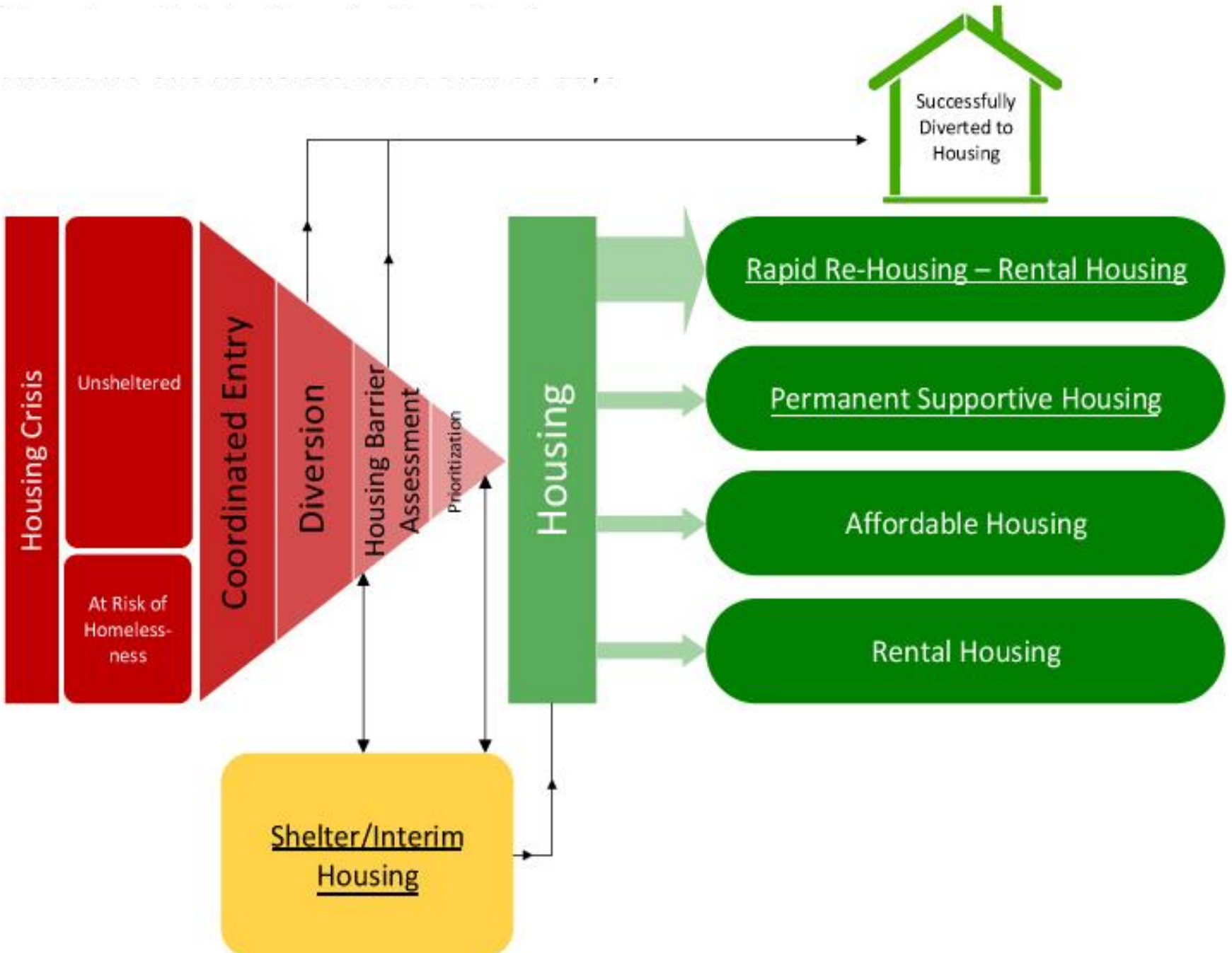
What is Coordinated Entry?

Overarching goals

- Reorient system to focus on those being served
- Minimize time and frustration accessing help
- Maximize use of system resources
- Identify service gaps for planning



Crisis Response System with Coordinated Entry



Source: Focus Strategies Housing Crisis Resolution System

In Vermont, we believe that coordinated entry will help:

Improve referral
appropriate-ness
and coordination

Increase
understanding
among partners of
what resources are
available

Decrease the time
that people
experience
homelessness

Help people move
in and out of the
homeless system as
quickly as possible
to achieve housing
stability

Support
community-wide or
system level
planning and
outcomes

Coordinated Entry is here to stay:

- CE is the system of record that drives and informs you as leaders, OEO as administrators and service providers for direct service and programming.

It is important to acknowledge that Coordinated Entry is governed by HUD and is not an optional system for Vermont. In order to receive funding, CE is a requirement.

While not perfect, it is an established system not being used to its' full potential. Using this system as an entire system of providers, including ESD, would not be nearly as costly as the programs we're all trying to manage.

- Recommendation #1: Support to have ESD use the same system that all direct providers are using.

Possible “positive” outcomes of ESD being licensed:

The Data captured is what informs OEO and ultimately our legislatures to help allocate funding based on “need” within communities.

ESD often places households into temporary housing and has the very “first” contact. Using this system would streamline services in a more timely manner and would avoid loss of contact and the potential of the household being unserved due to administrative errors.

ESD serves people across the state and has a better, more thorough view of the persons location(s). Using this system to coordinate care across the state will avoid duplication of efforts (\$\$\$), provide more accurate data and most importantly: help participants to avoid the very stressful affects of having to re-tell their story over and over.

If all were using the system, fraudulent tendencies by participants would likely be less frequent. (again, saving money for ALL Vermonters)

Would encourage more focused conversations and will help to identify innovative ways to serve via technology. ** Explain that if we’re all using same system, our language barriers will decrease over time and could potentially be easier for decision makers to support implementation and programming. **

Second Recommendation: Keep GA Administration at the State level

- Regarding the transition to localizing General Assistance. As a direct service provider, operating 24/7 and serving an increasing complex population, I can attest that asking more of my staff of 9, and adding more to our administrative responsibilities as a lead agency, and/or asking any one of my local partners to take on the task of administering GA *at this time* is **irrational**.
- Goes without saying – most organizations are understaffed. The turnover in the past three years also makes organizations vulnerable to closing under added pressures. For small and mid sized nonprofits, onboarding and training is costly and takes away time better used to SERVE. These costs are not reimbursable by state or federal funds and come directly from our private donation and operating funds. The cost to clients is substantial even if not seen in by a monetary measure.
- Affordable housing availability does not exist. The suggested cap on nightly motel housing could further impact an already maxed out shelter system (all report being at capacity – **this means there are few to NO beds available already**). Ending the motel transitional housing program without having identified and available units will not make community organizations any more prepared to provide DIRECT AND LIVE SAVING SERVICES. Putting this burden on the very people trying to keep people safe is a stressor that could break organizations. Ultimately, it could harm 100's if not 1000's of Vermonters. Now is not the right time to add this responsibility to local communities.
- Proposal – Combine my first recommendation (ESD using HMIS), with keeping GA Housing with the State for a minimum of another year which will allow proposed and slated projects for affordable housing to come online and will provide you with more consistent data to then revisit moving GA Admin to local communities.

Third recommendation: Reconsider eligibility:

Review and align the HUD categorization matrix and compare to our current transitional housing eligibility guidelines. Our current system contradicts how households meet chronic homelessness and this should be remedied.

Health care for persons experiencing homelessness is lacking and our eligibility guidelines are VERY restrictive and put people at great risk of complicating medical conditions or worse, at risk of dying due to lack of shelter. EXAMPLE: Expecting amputees, those requiring refrigerated medication or that use oxygen tanks, to live outside is not what we do in Vermont.

Another possible example: Consider what it might be like to be living on \$1200 a month, to be disabled and be given 28, 84 or possibly 90 days to identify, qualify for and to move into permanent affordable housing. The average length of stay in emergency shelter is more than 200 days. How can we expect those in temporary motel housing to navigate this system in less than 3 months when we aren't using systems that coordinate more proactively? Keeping the motel program going, even at a nightly cost that seem extravagant is our best bet to putting humans in houses. The alternative that is becoming more and more likely is that we will be handing out \$100 warming kits that will provide tenting provisions to individuals and that will ultimately cost organizations, communities and the state in other ways not yet calculated.

To recap:

As an administrator of a homeless shelter that spends as much time at my desk as I do providing face to face street outreach and/or in the dishpan after serving meals, I would appreciate your consideration of the recommendations being put forward.

1. Encourage and support ESD to become licensed HMIS users.
2. Postpone moving General Assistance Administration for Emergency housing to local communities and lead agencies.
3. Learn more about the affects our current eligibility requirements have on the individuals that are without affordable housing options.

Lastly, I invite you to join me at any one of my monthly meetings. I can be reached at heidi@chcvt.org.

Possible Resources

Coordinated Entry Policies and Procedures [here](#)

Coordinated Housing Assessment [here](#)

Want to learn more:

Weekly Housing Solutions Meeting held Wednesday, 1:15 to 2:15 and concentrates on the CE Prioritization List from a direct service perspective. Used to identify housing options based on eligibility and provides support in the form of financial assistance application review and referrals across organizations.

Addison County Housing Coalition meets monthly; 1st Thursday of each month from 2:15-3:30 and concentrates on challenges faced by unhoused and the organizations providing supports. Housing initiatives and longer term goal setting are always part of the agenda.

Both meetings are virtual. To join at any time please email heidi@chcvt.org for more details.