

Housing Opportunities Action Council

Lead Administrator: Summary Report

Benton County and the City of Corvallis have contracted with United Way of Benton & Lincoln Counties to serve as the backbone organization, and host the position of Lead Administrator (aka, Program Manager) for HOAC from November 1, 2016 through June 30, 2018. Shawn Collins began serving in this role November 1, 2016.

Following is a summary report of the activities of the Program Manager, December 2017 – January 2018.

Project Updates

Ten-Year Plan Update & Workgroups: When the Update to the Ten-Year Plan (titled *Community Strategies to Overcome Homelessness and Barriers to Housing*) was approved in the December meeting, the motion also stipulated that it be presented to the Corvallis City Council, Benton County Board of Commissioners, and shared more broadly as appropriate. Presentation to the City Council is scheduled on February 20, and to the Board of Commissioners on February 27. The approved plan is available on the HOAC website at:

<http://bentonhoac.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/HOAC-TenYearPlan-Update-APPROVED-12202017-for-distro.pdf>

The workgroups formed to address keystone priorities continue to meet monthly. Reports from each workgroup will be a regular feature of HOAC meetings going forward. I include a few summary comments below.

- The Housing Supply and Messaging workgroup continues to discuss policy at the state and local level that impacts the supply of affordable housing in the community. Work remains to sort through where advocacy may be most helpful, and develop and share a deeper understanding of the impact and implications of policy choices to inform decision makers.
- The Care Coordination workgroup reviewed ServicePoint, the local interface for HUD's Homeless Management Information System, and the "touch-tracking" database used at Community Services Consortium, as it continues to explore possibilities for shared data platforms to support greater coordination of services and care. The group also discussed a vulnerability assessment tool, the VI-SPDAT, which will be a mandatory component of the intake and prioritization of clients for all HUD funded programs going forward.
- The Mental and Behavioral Health workgroup reviewed initial planning for a community meeting on Mental Health Services for Youth and Adults Experiencing Homelessness, which is scheduled for April 9th at the Western View Center. A review and discussion of services and gaps in mental health services for Benton County, and development of targeted next steps is planned, with the aim of increasing access to mental health supports for those experiencing homelessness.

Cold Weather Shelter: The Corvallis Men's Shelter has passed the ½ way point in the season. Use of the shelter remains high, and plans to increase the daily capacity of the shelter are currently being reviewed by the City Development Services and Fire Department staff. Volunteer turnout remains strong, but the volunteer base has been strained, as operations require 9 volunteers daily. Opportunities to volunteer at the shelter in February and March are not all filled – interested parties should see the SignUp Genius link on the Shelter website (<http://bentonhoac.com/corvallis-mens-shelter/>) to volunteer. Due to the overwhelming generosity of the community, the Shelter has amended the material donations wish list on the website to focus on those items most needed to finish the season. Community Services Consortium (CSC) funded replacement bunks and mattresses, and these have been installed in the Shelter. The new bunks include rails on the upper bunks, and an integrated ladder, increasing safety for shelter clients.

Case management services are offered at the Shelter, which includes at least weekly visits with a case manager who is focused on understanding the needs of Shelter clients, providing needed support to navigate and access services, and overcoming barriers to housing. So far this year, case management services have been regularly delivered to 48 clients of the Shelter, and the VI-SPDAT assessment (mentioned in Care Coordination comments above) has been administered to 30 clients. Gaining a better understanding of the particular needs of each client

helps drive not only an approach to assisting them achieve permanent housing, but also informs future planning efforts for this service, and how best to meet the needs of this population through the Shelter. This work also helps identify clients of the Shelter who may be eligible, and likely to succeed, in available supportive housing programs.

C.A.R.E: Corvallis Area Resource Event: Planning for a resource fair has begun in earnest, in cooperation with area agencies and the Corvallis Police Department. A planning committee has been meeting weekly, with representation from Community Services Consortium, Samaritan Health Services, Community Outreach Inc, Benton County Health Department, the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, 509J School District, United Way, and the Community Livability Officers. The event is planned for March 6th, at the Corvallis-Benton Public Library.

Homeless Outreach Team: A group representing a number of service providers has been meeting regularly over the past month, with the intent of designing a program of regular outreach to homeless campers in the Corvallis area. The team is reviewing best practices, and is engaged with both CPD and Corvallis Parks and Rec to ensure that efforts are coordinated effectively. Building stronger relationships, and connecting those homeless who are camping with services, will be the focus. The group is coordinating with Julia McKenna of CSC, to assist in the unsheltered PIT count at the end of January. It should be noted that formation of such a team is not only aligned with national best practices as identified by the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, it also supports one of the recommendations made by the HOAC ad hoc committee on transitional housing in early 2017.

Leadership Committee and Bylaws Review: In the January HOAC Leadership Committee Meeting, a discussion of the Funding Coordination Team evolved into a broader discussion of how the current structure of HOAC, and the work being done in each of the workgroups, may need to be better reflected in our bylaws and charter. While the original structure of HOAC included standing committees to address funding, and system design (through the SMART team), it did not explicitly address policy. However, each of the workgroups is engaged in work that touches funding, service system design, the impacts of policy and the need for advocacy to support needed change. The Leadership Committee agreed that this may present an opportunity to revise the bylaws and structure of HOAC, to acknowledge the significant role of the workgroups, and change the structure to better support seeking shared funding and policy advocacy. This topic will be reviewed in more detail in future meetings, and feedback and discussion is welcome.

Perspective

Not surprisingly, many have shared their opinions with me about the recently approved Update to the Ten-Year Plan. Also not a surprise, is that there are a range of opinions. If there is a common theme to critiques, it would center on the lack of what I might call “insert tab A in slot B” directions in the plan. I suspect the cause of this stems in part from the very nature of what’s being addressed by the plan – complex problem sets often require complex solution sets, and the root problems of housing and homelessness are certainly complex.

Outlining all of the specific actions that could or should be taken by community partners and individuals would have required far more than the already substantial work represented, and is arguably a bit beyond the scope and charge of HOAC. What we have built, in this document, is a framework for understanding the many facets involved in the problem, and a core set of strategies to pursue. It is up to each HOAC member and cooperating agency to identify ways in which their efforts can align with and support those strategies, and further the goal of affordable housing and accessible supportive services for all in Benton County.

That said, it would be a missed opportunity to not point out a few things I believe should be pursued (even as I acknowledge the limits of my ability to “direct” any specific project be taken up).

- Child and family homelessness is central to the “supply chain” of adult homelessness. Those who experience homelessness as a child, are significantly more likely to be homeless as an adult, experience violence and abuse, have lower lifetime educational and career achievement, and experience greater health challenges. While acknowledging the critical services already being provided, more must be done to alleviate child and family homelessness in our community. Projects to support the development of transitional family housing to stabilize families currently living out of cars and tents, development of permanent low-income and supportive housing targeted at families, and sustained support of those projects which already address this vulnerable population is critical, if we are ever to disrupt the supply chain of adult homelessness.

- Pilot projects to explore the viability of tiny home villages, managed camping, and other creative housing options are needed to support innovation, and bridge the yawning gap between affordable housing supply and demand. Efforts to amend local code, or support exemptions for specifically targeted pilot projects, need to be taken up by appropriate government bodies to open regulatory space for experimentation, and encourage investment by those with resources to acquire and build physical space. Without some creative exploration of options, we severely limit our ability to address the growing housing crisis, and hamper the ability of service providers to effectively support client needs for stable housing. Champions of housing innovation need encouragement to develop solutions for Benton County, and support to bring their innovations to life.
- While stable, permanent housing is a clear goal for all, the need for shelter services, a drop-in center, soup-kitchen and other services to address food insecurity, job training and placement services, mental health supports, and addiction services are all part of the “safety net” serving those in crisis, or struggling to emerge from it. New collaborative efforts are needed to secure the future of these critical services, and overcome challenges to funding which seem likely to increase in the next few years.
- Enhancing living wage employment opportunities for those who may need training, have some disability, or who may need a second chance after exiting the penal system, is a key step in strengthening housing opportunity. Additionally, revenue is often needed to support key services that address this population. Projects that could join employment, and revenue generation to support non-profit service delivery should be encouraged. “Social enterprise” models, such as have been successfully developed by Central City Concern, through their Central City Coffee and Central City Bed businesses, can benefit those needing an opportunity to rebuild their career path, and support needed services. Partnership with local business incubation and innovation resources to explore options could yield some great results.

I believe our community is getting stronger, even as we increasingly understand the extent of our shared challenges. Evidence of that growing strength is in the growing sophistication of the conversations we’re having, in our workgroups and across the community. We don’t always agree on what’s to be done, but the commitment to positive change being demonstrated in forums large and small, suggests that the collective will required is present, and growing. Time and again, people are stepping up, and making it clear that they’re here to make a difference, and failure is not an option.

Our region is filled with innovators, striving to build excellence, develop and extend best practices, and pioneer new approaches to our biggest challenges, whether in government, business or social services. In the fields in which we work, we have to continue to seek the edges of our capacity and comfort zones, we have to get partners old and new together, talk about shared challenges, and craft new paths to our future. We need to build, quickly and thoughtfully, on our shared values, our collective experience and expertise, and the experience of neighbors. We need to bridge the gaps in our systems that fail too many. We need to decide, finally, that the costs of doing something to change the situation are far less than the costs of doing nothing, and start making investments in a future that sustains us all.

Solving the problems we face is not a small task. But doing nothing new to address them and expecting change, is madness.

For anyone interested in discussing affordable housing and homelessness, and approaches we might take going forward, I can be reached at shawn@unitedwayblc.org, 541-757-7717, or through contact@bentonhoac.com.