Work Group for Supplemental NOFO
To Develop a Plan for Serving Individuals and Families Experiencing
Homelessness with Severe Service Needs
SUMMARY OF KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND STRATEGIES
9.14.2022

1. Background

The Work Group was convened in August 2022 to help develop the *Plan for Serving Individuals and Families Experiencing Homelessness with Severe Service Needs* which is a required element of the application for funding for HUD's Supplemental "Unsheltered" NOFO. The group has six members, all of whom have experienced or are currently experiencing homelessness. Some of the group members have experienced living outside and/or in a vehicle. They have held two meetings to identify recommended strategies to be pursued either through the Unsheltered NOFO funding or through other funding sources and processes. This document provides a summary of the work to date. The final Plan will be completed in October and will reflect Work Group's input.

2. General Recommendations

As part of their discussions and deliberations, the Work Group has identified some high-level recommendations and ideas for how to better address unsheltered homelessness:

- The term "unsheltered" is intended to be respectful but in many ways, it is actually offensive. It tries to give a technical definition to an experience that is traumatizing and tragic. While recognizing that "unsheltered" is a term that is defined in the NOFO, the Work Group affirms that whatever terms we use, it is important to always strive to preserve the dignity and humanity of people we are talking about. HUD's official definition of "unsheltered" is also very restrictive and tends to exclude a lot of people that are unstably housed.
- Each person who experiences homelessness is unique and has their own story. Policies and programs should not treat people who are unhoused as a monolithic group.
- In general, programs and services need to be more individualized and oriented to the needs of individuals who are unhoused. In particular, we need improved "connectivity" throughout the system. The system is very difficult to navigate, and people need help getting from Point A to Point B. Speed and responsiveness are also important. People have to wait much too long for assistance. People need housing now—not many years from now.
- There needs to be more accountability and transparency about how public funds are spent. People who are staying in a program (e.g., a shelter) that receives public dollars should be able to see how the program is paid for, what the funding sources are, and how the money is spent.
- Program rules need to be more flexible to make it possible for people to succeed. Rules tend to be made and enforced by people who have never experienced homelessness. "Don't tell me what is best for me if you have not walked in my shoes."
- Fundamentally, homelessness is a problem caused by insufficient affordable housing and people not having sufficient income to afford housing.

3. Strategies for Reducing Unsheltered Homelessness

The Work Group has identified some key strategies that should be prioritized, whether though Unsheltered NOFO funding or through other funding sources. Note that not all of these services are eligible to be funded under the Unsheltered NOFO.

a. Immediate Needs/Hygiene
   - There is a need for showers, laundry, clothing, bathrooms, and other ways to help people meet basic hygiene needs while they are unsheltered. It is hard to find a job or a place to live when you are not able to be clean or have clean clothing. Basic hygiene provides dignity and is essential.
   - Phones are also critical; it is hard to keep a hold of a phone when you are unsheltered, and people need phones to be able to access any help (services, shelter, housing).

b. Mental Health and Trauma
   - Being unhoused is incredibly traumatizing and can cause or exacerbate mental health and/or substance use issues. Being unhoused can cause people to become mentally unwell due to the stress of being outside, fear for safety, and focus on basic survival. It is hard to do things as basic as keeping appointments.
   - It is essential that staff from programs are understanding of trauma and how difficult it can be to transition back to housing. Staff sometimes underestimate the level of stress that people are experiencing, and the long-term effects of this trauma.
   - Once people are placed into housing, there needs to be more focus on helping to meet mental health needs and supporting them to rebuild their lives. There is a need for reintegration services to help people relearn things to rebuild a life.
   - Mental health and substance abuse services are insufficient.

c. Street Outreach
   - Street outreach programs will be much more effective if outreach teams include peers who have experienced homelessness. Train and pay peers, including people currently living in encampments, to be outreach workers, navigators, ambassadors.
   - Offer outreach at night when people are awake.
   - All outreach workers should be subject matter experts and have up-to-date and accurate information on available resources.
   - All outreach teams should enter data into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in real-time, so information can be shared and used to help connect people to what they need right away.

d. Physical Service "Hubs"
   - In addition to street outreach, there is a need for physical "hubs" for drop-in services where people can go to get information and to communicate with each other and with case managers. One key function of hubs would be a place people can go to find out the status of their housing applications and ensure they don't miss out on opportunities due to not having a phone or not getting messages in a timely way. The hubs would also be a place people could receive mail,

access immediate needs like clothing, laundry or showers, and a place to safety store important documents so that they are not lost or stolen.
- Hubs should be a place where people can regularly meet Case Managers, as well as access other professionals, such as medical provider and attorneys.
- Hubs should be organized by quadrants (north, south, east, and west parts of the County) and there should be a bus to provide free access to hubs. Ideally, each City should be responsible for setting up a hub.

e. Encampments and Peer Navigators
- Identify people living in encampments who are interested in leadership roles and invite them to be part of a council that works with the cities on policies relating to encampments.
- Employ people living in encampments to do clean-up and other kinds of work through Public Works.
- Identify people living in encampments who can serve as ambassadors for outreach teams. People are more likely to share personal information and seek help from someone that they know and trust.
- There is a need for more peer navigators and peer counselors throughout the system. Peer navigators should be trained and compensated for their time. Policy change is needed so that stipends/wages do not jeopardize benefits such as housing or other benefits received.

f. Shelter and Housing
- It can be very challenging to move directly from streets to housing. Sometimes people need a place where they can transition (e.g., transitional housing), or a time in which they receive more intensive services during a time of transition into housing
- Provide services and supports to people who are newly housed. If their trauma and crisis is not addressed, people will return to homelessness. There is a need for landlord incentives to get landlords to rent units to people (e.g., direct payments, tax breaks).
- Stigma about homelessness needs to be addressed, to interrupt NIMBY-ism ("not in my backyard") and discriminatory practices from landlords.

g. Use of Data
- There is always lots of data being collected but it seems like homelessness gets worse and worse. There needs to be action behind the data; use data to enact solutions in a timely fashion.
- We need more and better ways to understand how many people are unhoused and what their challenges are; not just Point in Time (PIT) count data. People who are interviewed in the PIT often do not self-report everything, such as criminal justice involvement. For many people, having a criminal background is a bigger obstacle to securing housing then mental health issues.
- There is a need for tracking and communicating data on housing – how many units are needed, how many are becoming available, how many developers are there, etc. Is the amount of housing production sufficient to meet needs?
- Need transparent data about how funding is being used.
- Look to other communities for what is working well and increase collaboration.