



# Plan to Serve People Experiencing Homelessness with Severe Service Needs

NORTHERN COLORADO CONTINUUM OF CARE

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## **Plan to Serve People Experiencing Homelessness with Severe Service Needs in Northern Colorado**

### **Introduction**

The Northern Colorado Continuum of Care (NoCO CoC) has a vision to ensure homelessness in northern Colorado will be rare, short-lived, and non-recurring using best practices. To work towards this weighty goal, the NoCO CoC relies on high levels of engagement and collaboration among its community partners. Formed in January 2020, the NoCO CoC covers Larimer and Weld counties of Colorado and is one of the newest Continuums of Care in the country. Our region's split away from the more rural Balance of State Continuum of Care occurred in large part as a response to the urbanization and changing needs of northern Colorado to address growing issues of homelessness. Specifically, there has been a wide community consensus in northern Colorado that our region needs to be able to set our own priorities and have local control over our homeless system to best meet our vision of homelessness being rare, brief and only one time.

The NoCO CoC is very proud of all the amazing work being done every day through Larimer and Weld counties to effectively end homelessness. The Plan to Serve People Experiencing Homelessness with Severe Service Needs, or "the Plan", described in this document is a prime example of how stakeholders in northern Colorado work together to house the most vulnerable people who often need the most support. The Plan details the work currently being done, work in progress, ideas for the future, and areas we know need significant improvement in our community's response to homelessness.

### **Developing the Plan - Methodology**

In order to create a complete picture of northern Colorado's homeless response system's ability to respond to people with severe service needs from an equity lens, the Northern Colorado Continuum of Care collected information from stakeholders at all levels of the Continuum of Care. Feedback was gathered from CoC board members, CoC general members, and persons with lived experience of homelessness.

First, during a special board meeting, the NoCO CoC governing board identified the CoC's current strategies for outreach, low barrier emergency sheltering and permanent housing, as well as where gaps and disparities may exist. Second, during a NoCO CoC

general membership meeting, information was gathered from stakeholders through a survey and facilitated discussion asking three main questions related to outreach, sheltering and permanent housing: 1) what are the current strategies and what is going well 2) what is being developed and improved, 3) what gaps and barriers exist to accessing these services. Third, the NoCO CoC sought input from people currently experiencing homelessness. The CoC developed a hard copy and an online questionnaire in both Spanish and English for participants accessing services through outreach, shelter programs, and permanent housing to provide input on the system's ability to provide responsive services to people experiencing homelessness (Appendix A). Case managers and other housing providers who attend weekly coordinated entry case conferencing meetings were encouraged to engage their clients in collecting this feedback through focus groups, one-one-one interviews, or through distribution of surveys. Additionally, input was gathered from the lived experience advisory groups that are organized by service agencies in Weld and Larimer counties.

The information gathered through these discussions and surveys from the CoC governing board, CoC general membership, and clients of CoC participating agencies informed this document, and emphasized the work that is being done, as well as where growth is needed. The Director of the NoCO CoC drafted the Plan, then the Plan underwent a period of public comment from the CoC general membership and received approval from the CoC governing board as well as representative(s) from the lived experience advisory group.

## **Overview of Homelessness in Weld and Larimer Counties**

The experience of homelessness in northern Colorado has been trending towards more people being unsheltered and more people identifying substance use and/or mental illness. The NoCO CoC conducted a trend analysis of homelessness in the region after the 2022 Point in Time Count (PIT), comparing data from the 2019 unsheltered and 2020 sheltered PIT counts (Appendix A). Based on this analysis, we learned that the number of sheltered people has decreased by 10.5% since 2020. This is consistent with the number of shelter beds decreasing during this period, specifically overflow and seasonal beds decreasing. The number of unsheltered people has increased by 44.4% between 2019 and 2022. We attribute several factors to this large increase.

First, the 2019 PIT Count of unsheltered people is very likely an undercount because it relied exclusively on collecting individual surveys from people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in known locations the night of the count. The 2022 PIT Count also relied on a more comprehensive approach of inferring that certain individuals were unsheltered the night of the PIT Count using HMIS data. However, ultimately there is a high likelihood that there truly are more unsheltered people now than in 2020 overall due to the decreased number of shelter beds available. Of concern, our analysis also found that people self-identifying as having substance use

disorder and/or serious mental illness has been increasing precipitously since 2019 for both sheltered and unsheltered people.

Analysis of the 2022 PIT Count data compared to the 2019 American Communities Survey (ACS) 5-year estimate data for Larimer and Weld counties show stark racial disparities. People of color make up a larger percentage of the homeless population than they do of the total population of the region, even when accounting for poverty rates. White people make up 91% of the total population of Larimer and Weld counties, but account for only 80% of the total homeless population.

We see the highest disparity demographically among Black/African Americans and Native Americans experiencing homelessness. Additionally, both Black/African Americans and Native Americans appear more likely to become homeless than other Northern Coloradoans in poverty, including other racial minorities. Specifically,

- Black people make up 1% of the total population, 2% of people in poverty, and make up 6% of the total homeless population.
- Native Americans make up 1% of the total population, 1% of people in poverty, and make up 5% of the total homeless population.

The year-over-year comparison of PIT data also clearly shows that people of color experience homelessness disparately to white people in northern Colorado. Specifically, the percent and number of Black/African American individuals experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness has increased since 2019. Additionally, the percent and number of sheltered American Indian/Alaskan natives as well as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders has gone down since 2019 and instead these groups are experiencing more unsheltered homelessness. The same trends were not seen in the percent or number of white people experiencing homelessness.

Since 2020, the racial and ethnic demographics of the overall homeless population has become proportionately less white. Most notably, the number and percentage of Black/African Americans and Hispanic/Latin(a)(o)(x)-identifying people has increased proportionately while white-identifying people experiencing homelessness has decreased.

## **Coordinated Entry in Northern Colorado**

Coordinated Entry is an essential part of Northern Colorado's strategy for identifying and housing people experiencing homelessness, especially those with severe service needs. In our region, our coordinated entry system is called the Coordinated Access Housing Placement System (CAHPS). The NoCO CoC collaborative applicant, United Way of Weld County, employs one staff person to coordinate CAHPS, with plans to hire a second staff member; general CAHPS oversight and policy is developed by NoCO CoC CAHPS Steering Committee and implemented by several standing workgroups. CAHPS includes nearly fifty community partners who assist in the process

of identifying, assessing, weekly case conferencing, referring and helping navigate unhoused people to available housing resources.

Additionally, the NoCO CoC has been a Built for Zero community since 2019, and was recognized for achieving quality by-name list for chronic and veteran household's data in 2021. CAHPS committees and workgroups use Built for Zero strategies to inform our system improvements to reduce the length of time individuals and families are unhoused with the ultimate goal to functionally end homelessness in our community.

### **Access to CAHPS**

Any individuals and families experiencing homelessness can be referred to housing through CAHPS either by being assessed at one of the 41 access points located strategically across Larimer and Weld counties at agencies where people experiencing homelessness often seek services, or through an online referral portal hosted on FindHelp.org. The online referral portal was recently created to expand access to CAHPS for those who have been underserved at traditional homeless service agencies or who live in rural areas. As part of the implementation of the online referral portal, we continue to increase our outreach and engagement to organizations who have not historically participated in CAHPS, such as healthcare, probation, competency court, education, libraries, cultural community centers, and others, to educate staff at these organizations about CAHPS, train them to use the portal, and encourage their participation in helping identify and connect homeless households to the system.

Another change that has improved access to CAHPS, particularly for hard to reach and highly vulnerable households, has been our transition to using HMIS to manage the CAHPS by-name list. This has allowed us to cross reference whether individuals who are enrolled in street outreach projects, day shelter programs, and emergency shelters are also on the CAHPS by-name list. By doing so, we have been able to case conference and intentionally outreach certain individuals who were being served at one of the CAHPS partner agencies but were missing from the by-name list.

### **Prioritization for Resources**

CAHPS maintains a prioritization policy for making referrals to housing resources that dynamically prioritizes the most vulnerable households within the most appropriate housing intervention. Specifically, we prioritize people who 1) are chronically homeless, 2) have the highest vulnerability assessment score, 3) have the longest length of time homeless, and 4) have severe service needs, such as vulnerability to illness or death, risk for victimization, high utilization of crisis services, being unsheltered, and other significant challenges or impairments. Our community believes that we need to be person-centered when determining a person's unique vulnerability and needs, and have structured our case conferencing process to look holistically at these factors when making housing referral decisions. Importantly, we also have created a culture that every person experiencing homelessness in our region are "our clients" and there is

not a place for favoritism for one individual over another when making referral decisions. This philosophy is particularly important when discussing individuals who may have higher service needs as they can be less likely to be engaged with a specific service provider and may have had repeated challenges in securing and maintaining housing.

## **Strategies for Coordinated & Comprehensive Outreach**

Outreach is a necessary function of a well-coordinated homeless response system. In northern Colorado, developing and funding a broad and accessible street outreach strategy has been challenging due to lack of funding and the urban-rural divide in our region. The NoCO CoC has identified increasing funding and support of supportive services, such as street outreach, as a priority. Currently, coordination of outreach across the CoC relies heavily on: two primary street outreach teams in the two largest cities in our continuum – Fort Collins and Greeley, our coordinated entry system (CAHPS), and the use of HMIS to track individuals accessing other homeless programs.

The two outreach teams that operate in our urban centers of Fort Collins and Greeley use best practice strategies for proactively engaging with people experiencing homelessness to connect them to services. Both outreach teams prioritize connecting with individuals who are highly vulnerable and offering resources and support. In Fort Collins, Outreach Fort Collins is based in the downtown area, expanded to north Fort Collins 2 years ago, and expanding to midtown in September 2022. Outreach Fort Collins works to engage with unhoused individuals and meet them at their point of need, proactively providing community resources, information, and general support as needed, as well as seeking to intervene and ideally prevent certain circumstances that could lead to an individual being cited a ticket or potentially arrested. Outreach Fort Collins also works to engage with area businesses and general community members to listen and provide information on how to appropriately and productively respond to concerns associated with visible homelessness. In Greeley, in addition to providing general resources, information and support, the street outreach work focuses on engaging individuals who are living in encampments and encouraging them to connect with the local housing navigation center. Both outreach teams are key points of access to the coordinated entry by-name list and both teams proactively contact individuals who have been referred to a permanent supportive housing or other housing resource through CAHPS to connect them to the next step in the process.

Additionally, there has been development of medical and behavioral health outreach strategies; one Greeley-based street outreach worker rides along with a specialized EMS unit, Squad 1, several days a week and on other days of the week staff from the local behavioral health clinic, NorthRange Behavioral Health, ride along as well to provide mental health resources and support. Outreach Specialists from Outreach Fort Collins are trained to administer Narcan and carry Narcan, fentanyl test strips, and

portable sharps containers as well as fully stocked first aid kits. Additionally, OFC has a Summitstone Behavioral Health employee embedded on their staff full time who frequently acts as an expeditious conduit for mental health crises when these behaviors are observed in clients. Fort Collins has 2 Mental Health Response Teams that include police and mental health clinicians that respond to incidents where people might be in a mental health crisis.

Gaps in street outreach remain a high priority to fill. In the third largest city in our region, Loveland, there are limited street outreach efforts currently. Loveland residents experiencing homelessness, particularly those who do not engage regularly with the local services, are often very difficult to connect to housing resources due to a lack of mobile outreach. As part of an effort the City of Loveland is implementing to address growing encampments in the city, a new outreach team has begun engagement efforts at motel rooms paid for by the city and occupied by individuals who formerly were living in encampments; the goal is to expand this into a fuller street outreach program in the near future. Outside of Loveland, there are also large gaps in outreach coverage for the vast majority of the rural parts of our two counties, with the exception being south Weld County, where there is outreach efforts one or two days a week in Fort Lupton by Almost Home, a homeless service agency based out of Brighton, CO.

Outside of traditional street outreach efforts, CAHPS and HMIS are used as tools for outreaching and engaging individuals. When someone on the by-name list is referred to a housing resource through CAHPS, the case conferencing teams are tasked with identifying a responsible party to attempt contact with the household and assist them in connecting with that resource. This strategy relies on the robust attendance of over 40 CAHPS partners to our weekly case conferencing meetings. It also is supported by accessing our HMIS to determine whether the individual is actively enrolled in services somewhere. We also have several partner agency staff who have access to the Medicaid records system and have been helpful in locating individuals using that information.

## **Strategies for Low Barrier Sheltering**

### **Emergency Sheltering Strategies**

The Northern Colorado Continuum of Care is committed to supporting the use of a Housing First approach and ensuring that vital services for people experiencing homelessness are low barrier. As in many communities, the implementation of low and lower barrier approaches to sheltering is a process. In northern Colorado, there remains certain higher barrier sheltering that require sobriety and clients to search for employment as a condition of their stay. However, in the last two years there has been a significant reduction in such "housing ready" focused shelters and a palpable shift towards expanding low and lower barrier options.

In the last two years, several major positive changes to sheltering has occurred in northern Colorado. These changes in part were initiated as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but have remained in effect and have become a key aspect of northern Colorado's strategy to provide low barrier sheltering.

First, shelters in northern Colorado have reconfigured their programming to serve more individuals and families, many of whom have severe service needs. Two emergency shelters in Fort Collins, Fort Collins Rescue Mission and The Samaritan House-Catholic Charities, restructured to expand the number of individuals and families they were able to accommodate each night, and developed stronger partnerships with local funders to support this expansion. Importantly, due to this opportunity, it also allowed the programs to evaluate their barriers to entry and make changes that resulted in increased access to shelter. For example, one program began offering "damp" sheltering rather than the previous "dry" campus, allowing individuals who were under the influence of alcohol to still stay at the shelter overnight. The shelters also removed the requirement that guests who are registered for a bed leave the premises early in the morning in favor of providing access to the shelter building during the day, an important change that allows those with higher needs to have a safe place to be at any time of day. In Greeley, while there is no low barrier year-round nightly shelter, there has been the implementation of a seasonal cold weather shelter that is low barrier and provides a safe place for any individual needing shelter. In 2022, the entity that funds the Greeley cold weather shelter, United Way of Weld County, elected to take the operations of the shelter internally to further embrace low barrier and trauma-informed practices. There is also a Weld County workgroup that is actively working on identifying options for a year-round accessible emergency shelter in the Greeley-Evans area. In Loveland, there has been significant progress as well in creating low barrier sheltering and reducing the growing number of encampments and general unsheltered homelessness in the area. Until mid-2022, there was only a small cold weather shelter that operated in the city, but for the majority of the year there were no other sheltering options. However, in the summer of 2022 the Loveland City Council voted to fund and set up a new year-round shelter as soon as possible, and a low barrier shelter began offering nightly services several weeks later. The new shelter provides 24/7 access to services, no drug and alcohol testing, as well as allows people to bring their pets with them to shelter.

There are also four domestic violence emergency shelter programs spread out within the CoC that provide 24/7 lower barrier safe sheltering for victims of domestic violence and family violence. The three largest of these domestic violence providers in Greeley, Fort Collins and Loveland are access points for coordinated entry. These shelters have had a long history of providing trauma informed programming, but over the last several years they have undergone an evaluation process to center housing and housing first practices as foundational for victim's long term safety and stability.



Second, northern Colorado has emphasized increased access to day sheltering options. In Fort Collins, the Murphy Center serves as both a comprehensive resource center, access point to coordinated entry, and general safe place for people experiencing homelessness to spend their time during the day, as well as offering housing navigation services. During the height of COVID-19, the Murphy Center expanded their hours of operation to later into the afternoon and also on weekends. The day shelter services at the Murphy Center has had to be scaled back recently due to reduced funding, however if additional funding was secured this type of programming could be scaled back up quickly. Additionally, both Fort Collins Rescue Mission and Catholic Charities started 24/7 shelter in their facilities in 2021 and have continued that practice year round. In Greeley, there has also been an expansion of day sheltering through the United Way of Weld County Housing Navigation Center (HNC). The HNC is an important lifeline for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Weld County, as there are no other locations individuals can go to access basic needs and support. In 2022, the HNC moved to a larger, more accessible space and is currently working on constructing showers and laundry service. In Loveland, the Loveland Resource Center, a safe day shelter for people experiencing homelessness, recently opened in tandem with the new night shelter. This resource center fills a gap in the Loveland area to assist people primarily living outdoors with connection to key services and to be referred to coordinated entry. In addition to these three hubs of day sheltering, there are also important family day shelter/resource services in Fort Collins through Family Housing Network, in Fort Lupton through Hope at Miracle House, and in Estes Park through Crossroads Ministry.

In both Larimer and Weld counties, there has been an expansion of transitional housing programs that do not operate specifically as low-barrier but provide an important housing option for some families and individuals. The NoCO CoC believes in Housing First as a key tenant of addressing homelessness, particularly for the most vulnerable unhoused people in our community. While the traditional Transitional Housing (TH) model often is at odds with Housing First philosophy, the NoCO CoC is understanding that the local TH programs provide needed services for individuals and families seeking more structure and a sober environment. The CoC has engaged in providing education and guidance on how programs using a TH model can also remove barriers and embrace housing first practices to the extent possible inside their program model.

The sheltering options in northern Colorado have expanded and improved programming over the last several years, however there still is a gap in the number of shelter beds available compared to the number that is needed. As described earlier in this document, unsheltered homelessness has increased overall in northern Colorado. The NoCO CoC remains firm in the belief that investing in permanent housing is the ultimate solution to reducing homelessness, however it is also important to ensure those who are currently unhoused do have access to a safe place to sleep while they

are navigating toward housing. For this reason, in addition to the current sheltering strategies, northern Colorado is working on investing in two large hubs for services and sheltering, including one campus in Fort Collins and one in Greeley that are under development, likely to open doors in 2024. While both of these campuses will be operated separately, they both have plans to centralize and coordinate services, such as housing navigation, healthcare, and other vital services for people experiencing homelessness as well as expand the space for nightly shelter. It is the hope that having these two campuses that people experiencing homelessness, especially those with the highest needs, will have more centrally located access to care, support, and assistance to provide for basic needs as well as to help them move into permanent housing. Lastly, there is also work being done in Loveland to build and operate a regional youth shelter and drop-in center for young people ages 12-21. This is being done in partnership with the area school districts, Thompson and Poudre, a local youth service provider, the Matthews House, with technical assistance from a youth shelter operator in Boulder County, TGTHR. This project is in the beginning stages, but as of summer 2022 a site has been identified and the partners are working on identifying capital and operating funds.

### **Connecting to Healthcare**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to provide direct connection of medical and behavioral health services inside the shelter setting to reduce the burden for people needing to seek out these essential services on their own. Much of this connection in northern Colorado occurs at the day shelters. The Murphy Center serving Larimer County and the Housing Navigation Center (HNC) serving Weld County holds weekly office hours for several healthcare providers, including physical, dental and behavioral health. For example, HNC in Greeley and Banner Health are in the process of finalizing a partnership to have physicians come to provide “backpack medicine” to clients to triage minor injuries, conduct feet checks, and provide non-emergent medical care or connect clients to the hospital if needed. At both the HNC and the Murphy Center in Fort Collins, the local public behavioral health treatment provider – NorthRange Behavioral Health and Summitstone Health Partners – conduct intakes and provide mental health counseling onsite. The day centers also play an important role in harm reduction for people navigating substance use disorders. The HNC hosts mobile medication assisted treatment (MAT) services from Front Range Clinic. Both day centers have Harm Reduction Vending Machines that dispense clean supplies for intravenous drug use and safer sex, and also partner with the local health department to offer testing and vaccination for diseases and infections people experiencing homelessness are often at high risk of contracting. The day centers also have navigators that can connect people to public benefits, such as Medicaid, to ensure that they have health coverage, prescription assistance, dental care, etc.

Victims of domestic violence often do not feel safe accessing services at the day center, so our domestic violence shelters bring medical and behavioral healthcare providers onsite or facilitate telehealth appointments. There are also certain programs that do not exclusively serve people experiencing homelessness but are members of the NoCO CoC and have open office hours for individuals seeking care for mental health or substance use to receive crisis services; several of these programs also provide care coordination for individuals receiving Medicaid. In the future, the NoCO CoC envisions further expanding access to such centralized services outside of the larger cities and into the more rural areas of our counties.

### **Connecting to Employment**

While someone is actively experiencing homelessness, it is most important to connect them to housing as quickly as possible. However, for those who desire employment, northern Colorado has utilized several strategies inside the emergency shelters. In Larimer County, Homeward Alliance, the agency that operates the Murphy Center, has created and expanded a program called Hand Up in which employment specialists work with clients experiencing homelessness to build a resume, apply for jobs, and connect with employer partners. Homeward Alliance partners with other agencies to host office hours for their Hand Up employment specialists throughout Larimer County. Another strategy that has been deployed is targeting employment services for individuals at high risk for exiting incarceration into homelessness. In Larimer County, Homeward Alliance supports a re-entry program called Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills (WAGEES) for individuals exiting the criminal justice system. The program works with clients to set and attain employment and educational goals and secure stable housing.

In Weld County, Weld Employment Services hold weekly office housing at the Housing Navigation Center, assisting guests with resume building, job searching and general employment readiness. Additionally, Jobs of Hope operates a reentry program that provides employment and transitional housing services to individuals 18 and over, released from incarceration having had or currently gang-affiliated and involved in the justice system. As a participant of the Jobs of Hope program, individuals meet regularly with their Reentry Case Manager/Navigator to receive a fully integrated, holistic and collaborative service planning for meeting self-identified goals related to employment and permanent housing.

The NoCO CoC supports offering employment assistance to those experiencing homelessness inside emergency shelter programs, however many people experiencing homelessness are not able to find or maintain employment due to the challenges and circumstances of being homeless, or due to a disabling condition that prevents them from working. The CoC believes that for shelter programs intended to serve people with higher service needs, it is essential access to shelter is not contingent on an

individual seeking or maintaining employment as this can become a significant barrier that could lead that individual or family into unsheltered homelessness.

## **Strategies for Low Barrier Permanent Housing**

### **Current Permanent Housing Strategies**

As in other areas of the country, there is an immense lack of affordable housing in northern Colorado. Low vacancy rates and high demand for affordable and market rate units alike have made it very difficult for people experiencing homelessness, particularly those with significant service needs, to secure and maintain permanent housing without financial assistance and access to supportive services.

Despite this, northern Colorado is also working diligently to increase the number of resources available for permanent supportive housing (PSH) and rapid rehousing (RRH), as well as funding the kind of ongoing supportive services needed to help formerly homeless households stabilize in housing. Northern Colorado utilized the dramatic increase in COVID-19 relief funding to expand RRH programming, which has provided many lower acuity homeless households with rental assistance and case management supports. However, most of the agencies who provide RRH programming have expressed concern that even households initially identified as “lower acuity” still have significant barriers to maintaining permanent housing without an ongoing subsidy and access to supportive services due to high costs of rent, impacts of trauma, and lack of living wage employment opportunities. To alleviate some of this concern, northern Colorado chose to prioritize households in this situation to receive the Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHVs) that came to our community; households were able to transition to receiving a long-term EHV but still continue receiving supportive services provided by the agency previously providing RRH assistance.

Permanent supportive housing options, which are most often necessary for those people experiencing homelessness with severe service needs, are in short supply in northern Colorado. In January of 2021, a new 60 unit permanent supportive housing community, Mason Place, opened in Fort Collins, which provided much needed increased housing opportunities for our most vulnerable homeless individuals. Currently there are two 60 unit PSH apartment complexes in Fort Collins, small PSH projects in Greeley and in Loveland, a small PSH project for victims of domestic violence in Loveland, and some PSH vouchers administered by the region’s two large public behavioral health centers, NorthRange Behavioral Health and Summitstone Health Partners. Despite these PSH resources, our community still has about 160 people on our coordinated entry by-name list who have been assessed to need PSH (~45% of the by name list).

Fortunately there are two large PSH projects currently in development in areas of our CoC that have had a significant dearth of permanent supportive housing options, one in Loveland and one in Greeley. A 54 unit PSH community in Loveland, called St.

Valentines Apartments, has broken ground as is expected to open late 2023. It will fill units using coordinated entry, initially prioritizing those individuals who live in Loveland and who are assessed as being the most vulnerable, including people with severe service needs and who are chronically homeless. In Greeley, there is a campus-model project including a proposed 60-unit PSH complex that is under development and is applying for Low-Income Housing Tax Credits from the State of Colorado in February 2023.

In keeping with best practice for permanent supportive housing, all of the PSH communities in northern Colorado follow Housing First principles and use coordinated entry to make referrals for the vast majority of their units. For example, the two largest PSH communities, Mason Place and Redtail Ponds, are staffed at all times, have a therapist who maintains office hours on site, and employ case managers onsite as well. These case managers provide support to residents for achieving their personal goals as well as play a key role in encouraging a positive tenant culture, particularly for those individuals who had been experiencing out-of-doors homelessness for many years and who may have difficulty adjusting to living in their own apartment.

### **Connecting to Mainstream Housing Resources**

Outside of specific PSH resources, northern Colorado is working towards increasing access to mainstream housing resources, including effective use of available mainstream housing vouchers as well as building out county-wide landlord engagement strategies, and affordable housing advocacy efforts.

The largest Public Housing Authority in our region, Housing Catalyst, has a variety of special purpose vouchers (VASH, FUP, FYI, NED, EHV, and Mainstream) and they have implemented a homeless preference as well as a move on preference. To assist eligible households with finding and leasing a unit, there are housing specialists employed in our region that are available to help individuals from voucher issuance, navigation and housing stabilization. In Loveland, the Loveland Housing Authority sets aside units for youth (18-24) experiencing homelessness, with youth tenants being offered supportive services through a partnership with the Matthews House, a service provider for at-risk youth and families. Given the close proximity of Weld County and the City of Greeley, some individuals with HCV's issued by Housing Catalyst choose to seek housing in Weld County. Greeley Housing Authority absorbs those vouchers when they are able which allows Housing Catalyst to reissue to another qualifying household.

Another strategy for increasing access to mainstream housing is through the development of effective landlord outreach and engagement. The goal of such efforts is to increase the number of private rental options for people with challenging rental history, poor credit or justice involvement, create consistent messaging to landlords of what kinds of benefits and supports are available to leasing to individuals who are receiving assistance from a housing program, as well as work to reduce stigma and bias

around renting to people with a history of homelessness, and create a better system for individual housing programs to know and access available rental inventory that could be a fit for the needs of their client. Currently, in summer of 2022, there is a NoCO CoC workgroup that is participating in the Community Solutions Built for Zero Property Engagement Cohort to build out a foundation for a coordinated landlord engagement strategy, including the possibility of hiring a staff position and increase flexible funding available for landlord incentives and other costs to reduce barriers to housing for people on our coordinated entry by-name list.

There are other landlord engagement efforts in each county that are currently living within a workgroup or committee, but are in the process of seeking funding to support more targeted approaches. Additionally, Housing Catalyst, the PHA serving Fort Collins, was awarded Moving to Work status, a designation a small number of public housing authorities across the country have gained, to design and implement local solutions intended to increase housing choices for low-income families. Housing Catalyst is in the Landlord Engagement cohort #4. They will be implementing several strategies in the coming year to increase the number of new landlords who accept Housing Choice Vouchers including monetary incentives and damage funds.

Finally, there is important advocacy and policy change work building in northern Colorado that will have a longer term positive impact on increasing the amount of affordable housing available in the region. The Thriving Weld Housing and Land Use Project is a housing project led by the Weld County Department of Public Health and Environment and United Way of Weld County. This project aims to address affordable housing issues through land use code and zoning changes and modifications to housing policies. By engaging with municipalities and community residents, affordable housing policy development can be facilitated. In Fort Collins, the advocacy group One Voice For Housing recently has come together to advocate for solutions centered on the environmental, social and economic impacts of housing affordability across the community.

## **Strategies for Supporting Underserved Communities**

The NoCO CoC is committed to expanding care and services for the most vulnerable people in northern Colorado, specifically traditionally underserved communities. To put commitment into action, the NoCO CoC is implementing equitable system's change strategies informed by participation in learning cohorts from StriveTogether, Community Solutions Built for Zero Initiative, and HUD-sponsored workshop on System Improvement Using Stella-P. Each of these opportunities have provided us with a framework to understand inequality within our system from different angles and make progress on creating more equity and diversity within our CoC in meaningful ways. First, working with StriveTogether, we have focused on developing opportunities to elevate the voices of persons with lived experience inside the work of our CoC.

Second, working with Community Solutions Built for Zero Initiative, we have focused on ensuring our goal of ending homelessness includes knowing we have addressed racial/ethnic disparities in our housing system. Third, working through the HUD-sponsored workshop on System Improvement using Stella-P, we have set a specific goal of increasing enrollments of Hispanic/Latin(a)(o)(x) individuals into our coordinated entry to reach parity with non-Hispanic individuals.

Participating in the StriveTogether work led us to create a CoC committee to implement the StriveTogether Theory of Action framework to develop more equitable strategies for solving homelessness in northern Colorado. The NoCO StriveTogether committee is focused on: 1) establishing a NoCO CoC Lived Experience Advisory Council, and 2) expanding the diverse representation and participation in the Continuum of Care's boards, committees and workgroups. By following the StriveTogether action plan, the committee has developed an intentional and deliberate plan for building a lived experience advisory council and other opportunities for input that includes diversity of personal experience and cultural background. The NoCO CoC acknowledges the importance of compensating individuals for their work and has identified funds to pay participants for their work on the lived experience advisory council. The StriveTogether committee is also developing a plan to present to the CoC Governing Board on how to meaningfully incorporate input of those with lived experience into practice. The second goal of the StriveTogether committee is to expand the diversity and representation of participants within the CoC. Until this point, the NoCO CoC had not collected data on the demographics and background of its membership. The StriveTogether committee developed an anonymous demographics survey for all service providers and access points in the CoC to see where gaps and disparities may exist so that intentional recruitment to fill gaps in representation can occur. The demographics survey included a secondary survey to capture interest for individual's involvement in the work of the CoC, with the purpose of supporting expanding membership on CoC board, committees, and workgroups to be more diverse and representative of the community as a whole and the people it is meant to serve.

Second, northern Colorado began working with Community Solutions' Built for Zero Initiative in 2019. Since then, our community has achieved quality data per Community Solutions' standards and we are working toward functionally ending veteran and chronic homelessness. In May of 2022, community representatives went to Chicago to the Built for Zero Learning Conference in which focused on providing communities with tools to ensure that any effort to functionally end homelessness must do so equitably and that community must be able to show that their homeless response system addresses historic disparities in access to housing and housing outcomes for people of color experiencing homelessness.

Third, in tandem with the new tools provided by Built for Zero on building an equitable housing system, the NoCO CoC also participated in a HUD-sponsored workshop, System Improvement using Stella- P, to better understand how these racial disparities manifest locally. The committee participating in this workshop was able to analyze our HMIS data and other data sources, including our coordinated entry by-name-list data and our year over year Point in Time Count data, to identify multiple disparities in outcomes involving underserved communities in northern Colorado.

Specifically, the HMIS data revealed that Black/African American households experiencing homelessness in NoCO CoC are less than half as likely as White households experiencing homelessness to exit into permanent housing (14% for Black/African American households compared to 30% for White households). In addition, Black/African American households experiencing homelessness in northern Colorado are more likely than White households to exit the system into unknown destinations. There is a 15 percentage point gap between these two groups for exits of this type. The data revealed that Native American/Indigenous households experience homelessness for longer.

While the NoCO CoC is committed to addressing the disparities experienced by all underserved communities, at this time the NoCO CoC Data and Performance committee has chosen to first focus on the disparity between the percentage of Hispanic/Latin(a)(o)(x) households staying in emergency shelter and who are enrolled in coordinated entry (CAHPS) compared to the percentage of non-Hispanic/Latin(a)(o)(x) households. The Data and Performance committee identified that Hispanic/Latin(a)(o)(x) households were 8-percentage points less likely to be enrolled into CAHPS than non-Hispanic households. Because CAHPS is the process that most of our regions' homeless-specific housing resources are allocated, it is imperative for the CoC and its stakeholders to address this disparity and make a plan to prevent its growth. Driven by data, the CoC established a committee of diverse individuals and service providers to gather information and develop a plan to accomplish parity. Through conversations with community partners the Data and Performance committee was able to identify barriers, misunderstanding regarding resources, existing outcomes, and available resources. Following these conversations, the Data and Performance committee shared their findings with the CoC general membership and plans to continue data driven work towards creating parity in access to CAHPS.

Finally, in addition to developing and implementing strategies to address the specific systems that create inequity, the NoCO CoC governing board has also included equity practices as a measure for determining funding decisions for agencies applying for funding administered by the Continuum of Care. For example, in this year's CoC local competition project rating process, applicants are rated on a variety of factors related to how they have begun to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion at their own agencies. These questions are also weighted heavily in the project scoring process.



## Strategy for Reducing Unsheltered Homelessness using Special CoC Program Funds

In partnership with the general membership, each year the NoCO CoC governing board reviews and determines CoC-wide priorities that influence funding and advocacy decisions to support our mission of making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. These prioritizations are set using data on needs and gaps, as well as through feedback from CoC partners on where limited resources should be directed to make the most impact.

Over the last several years, including this year, the NoCO CoC has placed projects that serve 1) people who are chronically homeless, and 2) highly vulnerable households with high service needs as top priorities to fund and otherwise support. As described above, there has been significant investment in our region into developing housing options, such as permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing, for people experiencing homelessness who are highly vulnerable. This remains a high priority; however in 2022, the NoCO CoC recognized that our region has not invested as heavily into the kinds of supportive services needed to outreach and engage with people who are most likely to be unsheltered, least likely to be served by other programs, and often most difficult to place in mainstream housing. For this reason, the CoC-wide prioritization includes projects that provide supportive services, such as street outreach, housing navigation and stabilization, and/or landlord engagement, as the highest funding priority (2022 NoCO CoC Prioritization – Appendix C).

The NoCO CoC also recognizes that in order to build the type of response system needed to effectively and equitably end homelessness, there must be ongoing investment into the structures that facilitate this work, specifically our Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data infrastructure and our coordinated entry system (CAHPS). While they do not provide direct services to people experiencing homelessness, HMIS and CAHPS are essential systems needed to identify and connect unhoused people to housing, as well as a method of accountability to our commitment to serve the most vulnerable.

The Special CoC Unsheltered Set Aside funding will be used to further support these goals of increasing supportive services to people who are most likely to be unsheltered. The proposed projects will contribute to reducing unsheltered homelessness in our region in the following ways: 1) increased street outreach will allow more opportunities for quickly identifying unsheltered individuals and will work to build trust and connection to other points of housing first services, 2) increased resource navigation services can efficiently connect unhoused individuals to our coordinated entry system thus opening up opportunity to receive a permanent housing resource, 3) centralized landlord engagement efforts will create efficiencies within existing housing programs to find suitable and available housing for clients and it will

contribute to creating consistent messaging to landlords and property managers on the benefits of leasing to housing program clients. Additionally, these efforts will be bolstered through using Special CoC Unsheltered Set Aside funds to build HMIS capacity to evaluate our homelessness data for gaps, needs, and disparities, particularly for those people with significant service needs and who are unsheltered.

## **Conclusion**

The Northern Colorado Continuum of Care is committed to making homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring. To realize this vision, it is important that we continue to support and refine the strategies detailed in this Plan for coordinated and comprehensive outreach, access to low barrier sheltering and low barrier permanent housing, particularly for the most vulnerable individuals and families experiencing homelessness in our community. These strategies are intended to improve our system's ability to know as quickly as possible when someone becomes unhoused, to engage and connect that individual to the broader network of homeless services and supports inside northern Colorado, provide opportunities for safe sheltering while working to return them to permanent housing as fast as possible. Projects funded with the Unsheltered Set Aside funds, such as street outreach, resource navigation, and landlord engagement, will fill important gaps inside our strategy to reduce homelessness by expanding access to services, housing and supports particularly for individuals with severe service needs. We know through analysis of our system level data that people of color are disproportionately experiencing homelessness in our community and are less likely to access housing opportunities through our response system; this is a problem and it is imperative that we continue to make system improvements grounded in equity to address these issues, including sharing decision making power with those with lived experience. However, we are optimistic that we can make real impact. In our CoC, there is a strong culture of collaboration and desire to find solutions to homelessness. The strategies outlined in this Plan reflect our concerted community-wide effort to put desire into action to end homelessness in northern Colorado. Together we can end homelessness.