

Family Homelessness Initiative New System Design

At the December 2013 IAC Meeting, Debbi Knowles from CEHKC and the FHI System Transformation Work Group provided an overview of the proposed system goals for the family homeless housing system. The IAC voted to affirm the FHI system goals for right-sizing our homeless housing system to meet families' needs, including the system assumptions and refined program models. In May, Ms. Knowles and members of the System Transformation Work Group presented the **proposed targets for the new system design**. The IAC was provided an opportunity to discuss and ask questions, with the goal to **affirm the targets at the June IAC meeting**. In preparation of the meeting the following two documents are included: a copy of the proposed realignment targets and the guiding principles that serve as the foundational values and beliefs guiding this work.

Background

This body of work was developed in collaboration and vetted through the FHI System Transformation Work Group over the last several months. This group has come to alignment with this piece of the system transformation work to date.

The Committee to End Homelessness Family Homelessness Initiative is at a critical juncture. Our community is undertaking a comprehensive approach to systems change. This includes innovative strategies and ambitious goals to prevent and end family homelessness in King County. Perhaps the most significant systems shift is right-sizing the existing homeless system to one that provides interventions that best match the needs of families experiencing homelessness (having the right type/number of interventions to match our local typology of homeless families). Right-sizing provides our community the opportunity to:

- Remain responsive to emerging needs for housing and services in our community (guided by local data)
- Strengthen performance in our Continuum
 - Reduce length of stays
 - Increase exits to permanent housing
 - Reduce returns to homelessness
 - Shift investments to most cost effective solutions matched to families' needs
- Strategically align with HEARTH Goals and federal policy direction
- Serve more families

Better System Performance

To increase our system performance, we must create a better balance of interventions to meet families' specific housing and service needs, move them into permanent housing faster, and connect them with access to economic opportunities. This means aligning the current system – a continuum that includes a large stock of transitional housing projects with high-cost supportive services and lengthy housing stays that serve a small set of families – to a new system that serves many times more families, more quickly, and at a lower cost, with improved system outcomes. Primarily time-limited transitional housing units will realign to non-time limited housing projects. We are fortunate to have had the capital investments locally to support homeless families and we want to ensure that these units/resources are not lost. Projects will primarily experience a change in use (from transitional to permanent housing) and in some cases, target population.

Human services are always learning new ways to do work; it evolves with information/data, available resources, and the economic and political climate. Now we have more information than we did 15 (or even 5) years ago; have better tools and data to make these informed decisions. We have the opportunity to look at the collection of programs as a whole, and realign our resources with the needs of homeless families. Right-sizing our system to meet the needs of families revisiting the roles and expectations of our shelter and transitional housing programs and shifting our focus to provide permanent housing as a first step, with tailored services to support stability. Supporting this shift with continuous learning and data-driven decision making will be essential to its success.

How Do We Get There? Realignment Process

Efforts are underway to implement and support local providers and funders in participating in this systems change. Significant expansion of interventions that provide rapid access to permanent housing is critical to creating the right mix but will require the realignment of existing resources rather than relying on new funding. This will result in freeing up more intensive (and expensive) interventions for families that need them, while also allowing us to serve more families system-wide.

The goal is to “right-size” our system, shortening homeless episodes and increasing prevention and rapid re-housing services. Twenty-eight agencies (representing 100+ projects/1,000+ units of time-limited housing) are participating in the realignment process. This process requires two parallel bodies of work – one at the system level (refined models, assumptions, system goals and targets, etc.) and one at the agency/project-level (stock, funding, mission/expertise, etc.). We believe our timeline and approach will balance the need for momentum and provide time to thoughtfully undertake the larger system transformation.

First Phase:

- A smaller group of agencies will be selected to participate in an in-depth, funder-involved process of evaluating “how to” realign their transitional housing stock to permanent housing.
- All other agencies will begin efforts to adjust their service approach to the extent needed to align with the refined program models.
- Immediate next steps: Begin work with selected agencies and funders to examine budgets, programs, funding requirements, and housing stock to identify opportunities and barriers to realignment.

How will we know we are achieving the impact we want?

We will utilize benchmarks to work towards system targets; program-level and system-level data and performance will inform decisions to adjust or scale realignment efforts over five-years to achieve targeted performance. Benchmarks will provide a framework to show progress and inform changes over time. The proposed targets are based on what we know now-- family needs and best practices, and are fairly liberal estimates of the number of families that need homeless housing resources. As we acquire additional data, monitor trends, and improve prevention/diversion efforts we can adjust as needed. This will also include any necessary adjustments for specific subpopulations.

The goal is to have regular and timely dashboards that illustrate system performance (and program-level performance) which provide guidance in evaluation efforts. System performance and family outcome data will be monitored throughout the process to inform needed course corrections and modifications, including the identification of unintended consequences and new learnings along the way.

Continuous Learning

Although we feel confident in the proposed approach and initial targets, we recognize that there are still many unknowns. This is our best guess given what we know at this time with the information available to us. We are prepared to act now, particularly in with a thoughtful, phased-in approach. We acknowledge these are big changes for our community—for providers, funders, and families. We want to be careful and thoughtful. While there are risks involved to undertake these significant changes, there are also risks in not doing anything—loss of competitiveness for future funding—not being able to serve all the families in need of housing.

We acknowledge there are still funding issues unanswered, contracting kinks to be worked out, and unknowns on how the ‘theoretical’ models will play out precisely once system shifts occurs. However, we know as a community we can do better by supporting a more equitable and efficient process that ensures homelessness is rare, brief, and one-time only.