Savannah/Chatham County CoC (GA-507) Coordinated Entry Client Focus Group and Provider Strategy Session Summary Report

March 20-21, 2024

Introduction

In 2023, ICF was tasked by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide technical assistance to the Savannah/Chatham County CoC to assess their Coordinated Entry (CE) system and provide guidance on how that system might be improved through modifications to governance structures, assessment processes, and overall system coordination. On March 20 and 21, 2024, ICF conducted a series of in-person client focus groups and a homeless service provider strategy session to gather information regarding the current state of the Savannah /Chatham County CE system from the perspective of those with current or past lived experience who have interacted with the CE system, and of those of providers that are assisting clients with accessing housing through the system. The following report summaries feedback gathered from a series of 4 focus groups representing different segments of those persons with lived experience in Savannah/Chatham County and the results of a Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis exercise conducted with members of the CoC's homeless service provider community. The report concludes with a list of key takeaways from these sessions that may inform the CoC's direction for its Coordinated Entry system going forward.

Client Focus Group Summaries:

Focus Group 1 -- Stably housed people with lived experience

- Can you briefly share your experience with homelessness?
- Can you describe the process you went through to access coordinated entry services?
- What information or resources helped you understand the coordinated entry system?
- How would you rate the timeliness and efficiency of the coordinated entry system in addressing your needs?
- Were there any improvements or additional support you wished for during the entry?
- Do you think the coordinated entry system is fair and equitable for individuals/families with lived experience of homelessness?
- Can you share your experience with the housing placement process through coordinated entry?
- Are there any specific improvements or changes you would recommend for the coordinated entry system?
- Did you receive any follow-up support or services after being placed in housing?
- What advice or insights would you offer to others navigating the coordinated entry system?

Summary/Key Themes:

- Housing Placement variability:

    - Some clients reported very rapid housing placement (a few days); others took over 3 years from initial engagement to be housed
- Communication and Education:
    - In general, clients who received housing via engagement in the CE system felt like communication from the Homeless Authority regarding their placement was consistent and helpful
- Assessment Experience:
    - Most participants believe the assessment process to be smooth and straightforward.
- Recommendations for System Improvements
    - Clients offered specific recommendations for improving the coordinated entry system, including increasing staffing levels, streamlining processes to reduce wait times, and ensuring equitable access to services for all individuals experiencing homelessness
- Transition into Stable Housing
    - Clients shared their experiences of transitioning from homelessness to stable housing, with many highlighting the importance of accessing support services, such as recovery programs, programs to address mental health challenges and other interventions to stabilize their lives.

Focus Group 2 – Shelter residents in need of housing

- Were you provided with information about how coordinated entry works?
- Can you share your experience with trying to access coordinated entry services from the shelter?
- How well do you feel your unique needs and situation were assessed during the coordinated entry process?
- How did shelter staff assist you in navigating the coordinated entry system?
- Are you kept informed about the progress of your application or placement?
- How would you describe the speed and efficiency of the coordinated entry system in addressing your housing needs?
- Are there any specific improvements or changes you would recommend for the coordinated entry system, especially for individuals in shelters?
- What advice or insights would you offer to others in shelters who are navigating the coordinated entry system?

Summary/Key Themes:

- Communication and Education:
    - Clients expressed a lack of understanding about the Coordinated Entry process, indicating a need for clearer communication and education from case managers.
- Access to Permanent Housing:

        - Individuals, particularly those new to and unfamiliar with Savannah, reported confusion on how to access permanent housing from shelters, highlighting a need for clearer guidance within shelter facilities.
- Equitable Resource Allocation:
    - Clients emphasized the need for expanded resources and services beyond downtown Savannah to ensure equitable access for individuals across different geographic areas.
- Rapid Rehousing Programs:
    - There is a notable absence of rapid rehousing programs, indicating a need to address immediate housing needs more effectively through the implementation of such initiatives.
- Shelter Support and Internal Processes:
    - Clients reported that shelters were not actively assisting with housing applications internally, suggesting the need for enhanced support and streamlining of internal processes within shelters.
- Personalized Case Management:
    - Feedback highlighted the importance of tailoring case management plans to meet individual client needs, with clients expressing a desire for more personalized and engaging support from case managers.
- Childcare Support:
    - Parents experiencing homelessness identified a lack of daycare options as a barrier to accessing shelter services, emphasizing the need for increased childcare support.
- Financial Assistance:
    - Clients highlighted the burden of shelter fees, suggesting that removing such fees or implementing fee waiver programs could alleviate financial barriers and support savings for permanent housing.
- Communication and Timeliness:
    - There were concerns about communication and updates regarding housing applications, indicating a need for clearer communication channels and more timely updates on application status.
- Targeted Support for Specific Populations:
    - Veterans expressed easier navigation through the system due to the availability of resources tailored to their needs, suggesting the potential benefits of implementing targeted support services for other specific demographics.

Focus Group 3 – Unsheltered Persons

- Were there outreach efforts or specific strategies that made you aware of coordinated entry services?
- Can you share your experiences with outreach workers who were connected to the coordinated entry system?
- Were there any obstacles that made it difficult for you to engage with the coordinated entry staff?

- Do you think the coordinated entry system is fair and equitable for individuals/families experiencing unsheltered homelessness?
- How can coordinated entry and outreach services be improved for individuals in your situation?
- How would you describe the urgency and timeliness of coordinated entry services in addressing the needs of unsheltered individuals?
- Have you been provided emergency shelter options? Have outreach workers engaged with helping you access these options?
- How can coordinated entry and outreach services be improved for individuals in your situation?

Summary/Key Themes:

- Source of Connection to Shelter Resources:
    - Clients reported being connected to shelter resources primarily through outreach efforts by the Homeless Authority, religious groups, and the Housing Authority.
- Confusion between the Homeless Authority and Housing Authority:
    - Many clients expressed confusion regarding the distinction between the Homeless Authority and the Housing Authority, indicating a need for clearer communication and education about these entities and their respective roles.
- Disparity in Resource Allocation:
    - Clients noted a disconnect between the relocation of unsheltered individuals to the outskirts of the city and the lack of accompanying resources in those areas, highlighting an inequity in resource distribution.
- Response Time from Homeless Authority:
    - The Homeless Authority was praised for providing same-day responses on shelter resources, indicating efficient and responsive service delivery.
- Challenges with Shelter Services:
    - Despite receiving information on shelter resources, clients expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects of shelter services. Concerns included distance from familiar environments, restrictions on emotional support animals (ESAs), strict curfew times, insensitivity of shelter staff, unwelcoming environments reminiscent of prisons or institutions, and limited bed availability.
- Lack of Outreach Services for Specific Groups:
    - Clients highlighted a lack of outreach services tailored to the needs of women and fragile seniors, suggesting a gap in support for these vulnerable populations.
- Limited Shower Resources:
    - Unsheltered individuals reported a lack of shower resources, indicating a need for increased access to hygiene facilities.
- Resource Disparities Outside Downtown Area:
    - There is a noted lack of resources outside the downtown area, underscoring the need for expanded services and support in other geographic areas.

Focus Group 4 -- College students in need of housing

- Were there specific channels or resources that helped you connect with coordinated entry services?
- Were there any unique challenges you faced in navigating the system as a student?
- Do you think the coordinated entry system is fair and equitable for individuals experiencing homelessness?
- Were there specific considerations related to the temporary nature of summer housing for college students?
- How can coordinated entry and college services be improved to better support students in your situation?
- How can coordinated entry systems better provide ongoing support to college students transitioning from homelessness to stable housing?

Summary: Summary/Key Themes:

- Limited Resources and Support at Universities:
    - Students reported limited resources and support for housing assistance at universities. There is a lack of dedicated personnel and insufficient housing options for eligible students, leading to unmet needs.
- Inequity in Housing Acceptance Rates:
    - There is a discrepancy between the number of students eligible for housing resources and the number accepted by universities. This suggests inequities in the allocation of housing resources among eligible students.
- Financial Challenges and Lack of Housing Coverage:
    - Financial constraints, such as tuition not covering housing during breaks, exacerbate housing insecurity for students. Many students are unable to stay on campus during breaks, further contributing to homelessness.
- Specific Needs of Foster Care Students:
    - Students who are former foster youth face unique challenges, such as aging out of the foster care system while in college and lacking support systems during breaks, leading to homelessness.
- Recommendations for Support Programs:
    - Students proposed the creation of bridge housing programs for graduating students at risk of homelessness and suggested expanding internship opportunities to enhance outreach and support services.
- Challenges for Non-Traditional Students:
    - Non-traditional students, particularly those with children, face additional barriers due to a lack of resources tailored to their needs.
- Lack of Homeless Prevention Measures:
    - There is a notable absence of preventative measures for homelessness, both on and off-campus, contributing to housing instability among students.
- Disconnect between University Leadership and Student Needs:

        - There is a disconnect between university leadership and student needs regarding housing assistance. Students feel that refund checks are insufficient to cover housing costs during breaks, highlighting a gap in understanding and support.
- Awareness of Coordinated Entry Services:
    - Many students were unaware of coordinated entry services, indicating a need for improved outreach and education about available resources.
- Perceived Inequities in the Continuum of Care:
    - Students perceive the continuum of care as inequitable due to the deficit of resources for college students experiencing homelessness during winter and summer breaks, highlighting the need for more equitable distribution of resources

Provider Strategy Session

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) Analysis

Identified Strengths

- Collaboration amongst CoC members to successfully provide services
- Communication between providers
- Community Partner relationships
- Strong Street Outreach
- Community recognition that the housing dynamic in Savannah/Chatham County has changed
- Ability to refer clients to housing in a timely manner
- City and County are proactive partners in addressing homeless issues
- Police/EMS/Fire infrastructure is engaged
- Easy access to services (at least in certain parts of the City)
- Physical space is available to build and grow new housing and service opportunities

Identified Weaknesses

- Inequitable access—referrals for emergency shelter are declined for inappropriate reasons (weight, health conditions, etc.)
- Limited access to mental health services
- Low shelter bed utilization (67% average)
- Communication challenges
- Long waitlist for housing
- Staff fatigue
- Agencies working in silos
- Not all staff are up to speed on current HUD policies and procedures
- Lack of no/low barrier shelter or managed camps
- Overwhelmed emergency response system
- Limited access to after-hours shelters (referral window closes too early)

Identified Opportunities

- Increase availability of single room occupancy units
- Increase access to pet-related services/pet-friendly shelter options
- Additional training and professional development opportunities
- Additional funding to increase resources and services
- Quarterly meeting with Inter-agency Council of Homelessness (ICH) and the CoC to discuss weaknesses & threats
- ICH and other agency directors gain better understanding in all programming available to better structure services community-wide
- Increased City/County communication
- Increase corporate and broader community education on homeless issues (more workforce housing and public/private partnerships
- Develop new landlord incentives to promote affordable housing availability
- Expand shelter and resource options on the west side of the county
- Explore development of resources fairs with homeless-specific and mainstream resources can be offered in one spot
- Extend referral/intake hours for emergency shelters

Identified Threats

- Population Grown/spread of development in the region
- Lack of housing inventory (affordable and overall)
- Limited access to location of resources (not enough resources outside the City and limited transportation options)
- Clients being dropped off in Savannah/Chatham County from other communities to access our shelters/resources
- Need for continued City/Couty cooperation
- Increasing rental/housing prices
- Available housing assisted resources are maxed out but need continued to increase

Key Takeaways/Needs:

- Find better ways to integrate/coordinate shelter services and case management with the broader homeless services system. Both clients and providers see shelter policies and communication issues as a serious bottleneck in the Coordinated Entry system.
- Explore alternate funding mechanisms to offset shelter stay fees. It is understandable to shelters need to generate enough revenue to keep their doors open, but charging fees to clients to do that is presenting a significant access/graduation to housing barrier for many clients.
- Additional prevention resources community wide---many long term episodes of homelessness could likely have been avoided with small infusion of prevention funding.
- Improved visibility and role clarity is needed around the Coordinated Entry system. It is clear the clients and agencies alike aren't sure who is responsible for which aspects of the system, or even where the CE system stops and starts.
- Add/better integrate services for areas outside the City of Savannah. Services outside the City limits are either non-existent or are difficult to access from outlying areas.
- Case coordination/case worker system-level training needs to be improved. Clients reported a lack of understanding about who they needed to talk to to get a housing assessment/follow-up on a referral.
- Availability of affordable housing is a significant challenge in Savannah/Chatham, as it is almost everywhere. Will need to look for "out of the box" solutions, including innovative landlord engagement, public/private partnerships, etc.
- Re-evaluate and identify the most vulnerable in the community and ensure that resources are allocated equitably, giving special attention to the needs of college students, foster youth, and families experiencing homelessness.