

HUD Cohort 5 100-Day Challenge Case Study

Central Alabama: Partnerships with Municipal Courts

Central Alabama strengthened an existing partnership between the Continuum of Care (CoC) and Birmingham Municipal Court during the 100-Day Challenge, resulting in improved collaboration to meet the needs of youth and young adults (YYA) with histories of justice involvement.

HOW CENTRAL ALABAMA MADE IT HAPPEN

From the beginning of the 100-Day Challenge, Central Alabama recognized the importance of engaging other youth-serving systems of care in efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. The CoC already had a strong working partnership with the Birmingham Municipal Court and saw the 100-Day Challenge as an opportunity to engage a representative from the Municipal Court in more targeted discussions around addressing the distinct needs of YYA experiencing homelessness with histories of justice involvement.

The strengthened partnership between the CoC and Birmingham Municipal Court during the 100-Day Challenge allowed the community to brainstorm new, practical solutions for meeting the needs of YYA experiencing housing instability with histories of justice system involvement. A focus of this collaborative effort was the exploration and development of new processes to allow for case conferencing and information sharing between the justice and homeless response systems. By improving information sharing across systems, Central Alabama can better provide housing supports to YYA experiencing housing instability who come before the municipal court and can better target prevention efforts to divert justice-involved youth from homelessness or further justice involvement.

This partnership also encouraged outreach and engagement to additional system partners – particularly the Department of Human Resources (DHR), which manages the child welfare system in Central Alabama – to increase coordination around preventing and ending homelessness for systems-involved YYA. The CoC, Birmingham Municipal Court, and DHR have been working together beyond the 100-Day Challenge to coordinate housing stability efforts and establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) around transition planning, data sharing, and case conferencing for YYA at risk of or experiencing homelessness across systems.

Key Takeaways:

- Municipal courts can be key partners in helping to identify and meet the needs of justice-involved YYA at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Partnering with municipal courts can help the CoC identify unstably housed justice-involved YYA who are not connected to the homeless response system.
- Key areas of focus for collaboration between municipal courts and the CoC may include data sharing, case conferencing, and transition planning for justice-involved YYA at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Collaboration between the CoC, municipal courts, and other justice partners can benefit from coordination with the child welfare system as well.
- Operationalizing cross-systems processes between justice, homeless, and child welfare partners can help ensure that collaboration is sustainable and has the buy-in of system leaders.

LESSONS LEARNED

1) Support Justice Partners in Streamlining Referrals of YYA Experiencing and At Risk of Homelessness

One of the first steps to meaningfully engage the Birmingham Municipal Court in the Central Alabama 100-Day Challenge was identifying the unique role the municipal court could play in the community's efforts to prevent and end YYA homelessness. The 100-Day Challenge Team initially established as a part of their Challenge goal that 60% of youth housed would have touched either the child welfare or juvenile justice system. The Birmingham Municipal Court identified that although some of the YYA they engage have experience with the juvenile justice system, there is a broader population of justice-involved YYA who present to the Municipal Court in need of housing and homelessness prevention resources. This information encouraged the 100-Day Challenge Team to widen their population of focus from YYA involved with the juvenile justice system to a broader and more inclusive population of justice-involved YYA. This increased population of focus also supported the Birmingham Municipal Court in defining their role in the 100-Day Challenge, with the court bringing a focus on collaboration with the CoC to increase access to housing and homeless prevention resources for unstably housed YYA who present before the court.

2) Build Understanding Around the Role of Municipal Courts as Justice System Partners

The engagement of the Birmingham Municipal Court as a partner in the 100-Day Challenge helped to establish a better understanding among homeless and housing providers of what municipal courts do, how they can support local efforts to prevent and end YYA homelessness, and how they are distinct from other justice system partners. The Birmingham Municipal Court shared information with 100-Day Challenge Team members to help break down myths about the court process and to explain the difference between municipal courts and other parts of the justice system, including policing/law enforcement, probation, and family courts. A key function of the Birmingham Municipal Court is to respond to individual and community safety needs and to ensure that persons presenting in court are provided with the support and assistance they need to stabilize their personal situation and avoid justice system recidivism. Collaboration with the CoC can help municipal courts fulfill their commitment to addressing the individual and community safety needs regarding housing for YYA presenting to the court, and provides the CoC with an opportunity to assist unstably housed, justice-involved YYA who are not connected to the homeless response system and prevent or end their housing crisis as quickly as possible.

3) Identify Areas of Focus to Guide Early Cross-Systems Collaboration Efforts

The Central Alabama 100-Day Challenge Team identified mutually beneficial areas of focus to guide early collaboration efforts between the CoC and Birmingham Municipal Court. By focusing on a small number of topics during the 100-Day Challenge, the CoC and municipal court were able to prioritize activities that would help establish a strong foundation for ongoing collaboration and have the greatest impact for justice-involved YYA at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The Team identified three initial areas of focus for improving YYA-focused system-level collaboration: data sharing, case conferencing, and transition planning. In identifying these areas of focus, the CoC and Birmingham Municipal Court also identified the need to more directly engage the Department of Human Resources (DHR), which manages the child welfare system in Central Alabama, in ongoing cross-system collaboration efforts. There is significant intersection between experiences with the justice, child welfare, and homeless response systems; it was therefore essential to engage DHR in collaboration early to ensure that data sharing, transition planning, and case conferencing efforts are truly coordinated across systems.

4) Operationalize Processes and Procedures that Support Cross-Systems Collaboration

The Central Alabama CoC, Birmingham Municipal Court, and DHR have been working to operationalize their gains in collaboration that were accomplished during the 100-Day Challenge. The three systems are working together to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that will establish data sharing agreements for client-level data, guidance on utilizing the youth by-name list for cross-system case conferencing, and formal processes to support collaboration in transition planning for YYA exiting the justice and child welfare systems. This process requires engaging agency leaders from each system of care, helping to ensure that cross-systems collaboration extends beyond frontline staff and is embraced by leadership as a system-level commitment. Formalizing collaborative processes and procedures also helps to reinforce that these partnerships will be sustained and that there will continue to be a coordinated community response to preventing and ending YYA homelessness in Central Alabama beyond the 100-Day Challenge.