

# Enhancing Access to Resources for Individuals Involved in the Criminal Justice System

Individuals involved with the criminal justice system (CJS) often experience episodes of homelessness both before and after incarceration. CoCs can work with law enforcement, defense and prosecuting attorneys, judges and courts, parole and probation officers and others to enhance access to housing resources.

Coordination at each stage of engagement with the CJS – during law enforcement encounters, while moving through the judicial process, during re-entry into the community, and throughout community supervision – can foster early access to the coordinated entry system for individuals who may be eligible for those resources, reduce CJS involvement for individuals at risk, and help ensure that CJS-involved community members with significant barriers to housing do not fall through the cracks.

This tool builds on the strategies and action steps in Tool A, Engaging CJS Partners in CoC Governance and Planning, which describes processes for coordination with CJS partners and other stakeholders, including people with lived experiences of both homelessness and CJS involvement.

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## Key Strategies and Action Steps

- **Collaborate with people with lived experiences** of homelessness and CJS involvement to support design of programmatic and systemic partnerships and interventions.
- **Coordinate with parole and probation** to prevent and end homelessness for individuals with criminal records.
- **Engage with the courts and criminal justice system case managers** to support individuals experiencing homelessness who are involved with the criminal justice system.
- **Partner with law enforcement** including police and sheriff departments, to provide community alternatives to law enforcement response.
- **Work with CJS reentry staff** to strengthen discharge planning processes for individuals who are at risk of homelessness after reentering the community.

## Collaborate with People with Lived Experiences

People with dual lived experiences of homelessness and justice system involvement are critical partners in program and system design. With firsthand experiences of which approaches are – and are not – working locally, partners with lived experience are essential to identifying local gaps and challenges, designing new strategies, and implementing programs. While focus groups and listening sessions can be effective strategies to understand barriers and opportunities, longer term advisory boards can support comprehensive system change over time, serving as project consultants, facilitating focus group and listening sessions, and holding seats on CoC boards and committees to ensure meaningful feedback loops and clarity in how feedback is used.

See Engaging Criminal Justice System Partners in CoC Governance and Planning.

Strategies and opportunities:

- Establish processes that reflect the diverse array of intersectional experiences for people with lived experiences of homelessness and criminal justice system involvement. Identify relevant subgroups in the community such as experience of long-term incarceration in jail and prison, engagement in community corrections with parole and probation, cycling through jail and homelessness, jail diversion if available, and diverse personal circumstances and identities, such as immigration status, physical and mental health disabilities, race and ethnicity, and gender identity and sexual orientation.
- Ensure strategies are trauma-informed and consider the diverse backgrounds of participants and potential experiences of carceral trauma. For example, consider the composition of focus groups or listening sessions and consider holding several smaller groups tailored to individuals with common experiences. Engage people who themselves have lived experience of criminal justice system involvement to facilitate the sessions, supported by a co-facilitator and notetaker. Exclude program or criminal justice system staff who may have a chilling effect on candid feedback.
- Set up processes to meaningfully compensate participating individuals. Consider separate compensation scales or hourly rates for individuals who provide services as focus group participants, survey respondents, and program consultants to ensure that participants who are providing ongoing expertise and technical support are compensated accordingly. Where gift cards are used, provide the most flexible local option to optimize individuals' choice in using their compensation.

## Coordinate with Parole and Probation

Once individuals have served a certain amount of their prison sentence, they may become eligible for parole, which enables them to finish out their sentence in the community. For individuals that are newly convicted, they may be given a probationary sentence as opposed to a jail or prison sentence and must similarly abide by the structure of the designated probation program. Both parole and probation represent important opportunities to connect individuals in the community with housing resources. Strategies and opportunities:

- ❑ Establish working relationships with parole and probation officers to support local criminal justice partners to more effectively invest CJS resources in outreach, housing navigation, and housing programs that incorporate input and coordination with homeless system experts. Support community corrections staff to understand and make effective referrals to the CoC's coordinated entry system and other local programs for people experiencing and at risk of homelessness.
- ❑ Provide housing-focused supports for individuals in community supervision. For example, the Riverside University Health System (RUHS) spotlighted below has established "Justice Outreach Teams" in the community consisting of a substance abuse counselor, peer specialist, and housing coordinator, to provide comprehensive care and case management support to individuals while they are on probation.
- ❑ Target in-reach activities at halfway houses, transitional housing programs, and other community corrections facilities utilized by local CJS agencies, to connect individuals to CoC housing resources.

### **Community Spotlight: Washtenaw County, MI**

In Washtenaw County, MI, a partnership between Avalon Housing, a local housing provider, and the Washtenaw County Jail is serving as a pilot program to deepen coordination between the CoC and the criminal justice system.

Avalon Housing works to connect individuals on probation to CoC and other permanent housing programs. A housing navigator/case manager conducts targeted in-reach at the Washtenaw County jail in coordination with jail reentry case managers, to engage with and assess individuals that are set to be released into the county probation program.

The case manager provides a coordinated entry assessment to determine the level of housing and supportive service need and connects the individuals to CoC or other housing voucher programs once they have exited jail and entered their probation program. After securing housing, clients receive intensive case management support tailored to their needs and designed to keep them stably housed and connected to supportive services.

## Engage with the Courts and Criminal Justice System Case Managers

Many criminal justice system partners recognize the important role housing plays in public safety and reducing recidivism for individuals with criminal records. CoC system and provider leadership have engaged in a variety of strategies for partnering with courts and related CJS stakeholders to improve housing outcomes and reduce homelessness, including by providing housing as an alternative to incarceration. Strategies and opportunities:

- ❑ Establish relationships with CJS case management staff to coordinate resources. CJS case management staff include housing specialists and reentry coordinators who work to proactively connect individuals to housing and supportive service programs, with meaningful potential for partnership with the CoC.
- ❑ Partner with prosecutors, public defenders, legal aid, and the courts to develop housing-focused interventions for individuals involved in the judicial process. The court system can leverage these interventions to divert individuals away from jail stays, breaking the cycle of homelessness and CJS involvement. These partners may benefit from education and information on the CoC's housing first approach to understand impacts of housing on reducing recidivism.
- ❑ Understand the local problem-solving / diversion court systems, such as homeless and behavioral health courts, that may exist in your area. More jurisdictions are considering the life circumstances of vulnerable individuals charged with non-violent crimes, diverting individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges or homelessness on court dockets that provide connections to housing and other community-based services.

### Community Spotlight: Sonoma County, CA

The [Sonoma County](#) Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program (JMHCP) offers individuals dealing with severe mental health challenges referrals to mental health supports, CoC housing and service programs, and other community resources. A case manager within the jail system conducts an initial screening and assessment. The information is passed to the judge and court staff to determine if the individual meets the conditions for release into the community mental health and service program. Once released into this program, a participant's community case manager connects them to housing and other service supports.

### **Community Spotlight: Houston, TX**

The [Houston Homeless Court](#) coordinates with the CoC to support individuals experiencing homelessness who have been charged with minor offenses. Eligible individuals who wish to participate submit an application through a homeless service provider to the court system, which hears the case and confirms that the individual is seeking housing and other support.

This process supports individuals in working toward their housing and supportive service goals instead of fines or jail time, providing “credit for time served” for activities such as medical care, behavioral health, counseling and life skills classes, and employment training that can be attested to by shelter program staff.

## **Partner with Law Enforcement**

Partnerships with local law enforcement can increase access to coordinated entry for people experiencing homelessness and reduce criminalization of life-sustaining activities, such as eating, sleeping, and sitting. These partnerships can meaningfully support access to important resources for individuals experiencing homelessness in the community, while also reducing burdens on police, sheriff departments, and other first responders.

When considering roles in these partnerships, it is important to consider the strengths and priorities of each partner. For example, case management responsibilities are often better undertaken outside of law enforcement to allow officers to focus on other law enforcement priorities. Additionally, people experiencing homelessness may mistrust law enforcement based on past experiences or generalized concerns, which can make effective engagement or obtaining accurate information challenging. CoCs can support law enforcement partners to understand these barriers and identify strategies that are impactful and trauma-informed.

Law enforcement and CoC leadership seeking to develop effective partnerships may need to invest significant time up front as partners engage in active listening to understand goals, perspectives, resources, and where there may be shared objectives and opportunities for alignment. Taking the time to establish trust as a preliminary step in the partnership is key to having candid discourse around strengths and barriers for each system, and setting up programs that will have a long-term, trauma-informed impact on addressing homelessness.

## Strategies and opportunities:

- ❑ Engage local police department and county sheriff's department officers as referral partners to the coordinated entry system, street outreach programs, and other resources for people experiencing homelessness. Provide trainings to ensure officers who may be in contact with people experiencing homelessness understand the local CES, including how the system prioritizes housing resources and how to refer clients or support a warm handoff to a CES access point. CoCs may also wish to invite law enforcement partners to implicit bias, trauma-informed care, crisis intervention, and other relevant trainings provided by the CoC. More generally, CoC partners can encourage CJS stakeholders working with people experiencing homelessness to engage in structured programming to learn and incorporate trauma-informed strategies into their work.
- ❑ Partner with law enforcement to identify how approaches to encampment resolution or local ordinances that criminalize homelessness may result in high rates of law enforcement contacts and arrests and citations, burdening resources intended for public safety and exacerbating the cycle of CJS-involvement and homelessness. Law enforcement and homeless system leadership, including people with lived experience, can work together to inform and engage public officials to reduce the burden on law enforcement and improve housing outcomes by decriminalizing homelessness.
- ❑ Work with law enforcement to enhance supports for persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness, for example by identifying locations for targeted outreach or providing additional resources during emergencies and inclement weather events. Some communities also work with local law enforcement as a more integrated part of homeless outreach. While street outreach services are best provided by trained staff of a community-based program when possible, some communities leverage limited resources by coordinating street outreach with law enforcement. This may include homeless system staff “ride alongs” with law enforcement on patrols, or [dedicated officers on a homeless outreach team \(HOT\) focused on providing housing and service connections](#).

While law enforcement outreach programs are one strategy for connecting individuals with local resources, they face barriers in establishing trust, applying trauma-informed techniques, and deploying effective harm reduction approaches that can be less challenging to implement in civilian street outreach programs. Significant steps should be taken to ensure these programs are established hand-in-hand with policies that prevent the criminalization of homelessness.

To address this challenge, many communities rely on civilian street outreach programs or establish non-enforcement positions as part of the police force to respond to nonviolent calls rather than having enforcement officers conducting outreach. These non-enforcement

staff provide connections and transportation to community services to improve supports for individuals experiencing homelessness and reduce the burden on enforcement officers.

### **Community Spotlight: Colorado Springs, CO**

In partnership with the Pikes Peak CoC, the Colorado Springs Police Department undertook an in-depth planning process to [deploy a HOT team](#) as a local response to encampments. The process included feedback from dozens of encampment residents about their individual experiences, barriers to the local shelter system, and other questions to understand the local needs of people experiencing homelessness. The HOT team invested significantly in developing partnerships across the local community of service providers, attending weekly meetings with representatives from the services sector, people experiencing homelessness and homeless advocates. In encampments, HOT focused on establishing relationships of trust with repeated contacts, working with individuals to understand their specific needs, and providing meaningful referrals.

### **Community Spotlight: Wichita, KS**

The City of Wichita created a [homeless outreach team \(HOT\)](#) within its police department, dedicating officers to make housing and service connections for people experiencing homelessness in lieu of an enforcement-focused response. The HOT uses a case management model that mirrors that of the local CoC and avoids making arrests or citations absent serious crimes. The HOT shares its homeless service data with the CoC, coordinates with the CoC to make housing and service referrals on behalf of its clients, and operates as a co-responder team alongside community support specialists from COMCARE, Kansas' largest community mental health center.

### **Community Spotlight: Portland, OR**

The [Portland Street Response \(PSR\) Team](#) is a trauma-informed, crisis response team embedded within Portland's Fire and Rescue Department. The PSR Team responds to calls relating to mental health incidents and homelessness, reducing the need for a law enforcement response. The team consists of an EMT, mental health crisis responder, and peer support specialist that provide mental health triage services and make connections to the homeless system and other resources. When not responding to crisis calls, the PSR Team conducts community outreach in coordination with other community response organizations.

## Work with Reentry Staff

Lack of housing resources for individuals exiting prison or jail often results in extensions of an individual's period of incarceration, or discharge directly to homelessness. Individuals who are released to a temporary residence may also be at risk of homelessness when that time-limited housing expires. CoC and other homelessness system partners can work with partners in local prisons and jails to ensure CJS partners are able to identify and connect individuals at risk of homelessness to available resources.

Strategies and opportunities:

- Establish a system for prison and jail staff to flag individuals who were experiencing homelessness when detained or are at a high risk of homelessness after discharge and make warm referrals to homelessness system resources where relevant.
- Work with jail discharge planning staff to curate a list of housing resources and contacts and to incorporate coordinated entry assessments as part of the discharge planning processes for individuals who meet the definitions of homelessness, either through targeted in-reach by CES staff or by training discharge and reentry planning staff to conduct assessments.
- Coordinate with local jails and prisons to ensure pre-planning for individuals prior to discharge whenever possible, and to proactively connect individuals to CoC housing supports.
- Develop housing opportunities for individuals exiting incarceration who are no longer literally homeless due to being incarcerated for over 90 days.

### The **Community Spotlight:** [Clark County, WA](#)

A partnership between the Council for the Homeless (CFTH), the coordinated entry system provider for Clark County, WA, and the Clark County Jail provides a coordinated entry assessment process for any individuals incarcerated for fewer than 90 days.

Individuals entering the jail system are initially screened for homelessness by jail staff and then referred to CFTH for a CE assessment in-person or over the phone while they are still incarcerated. CES and housing navigation staff may obtain jail clearance to assess vulnerable clients as needed. For individuals who do not qualify for a CES assessment, jail staff provide a referral to street outreach programs for engagement and follow up.

Clark County Jail hosts quarterly meetings with reentry housing providers as well as training and information-sharing meetings with the CoC to enhance coordination and knowledge of resources available across both systems.



**Community Spotlight: [Riverside County, CA](#)**

The housing division of the Riverside University Health System (RUHS) oversees the county's coordinated entry system. RUHS embeds behavioral health staff in the county jail system to conduct CES assessments for individuals prior to discharge and develop a tailored, wraparound care plan for each individual facing homelessness or housing instability. If a permanent housing option is not available at discharge, RUHS staff make connections to temporary housing or shelter while they continue to work on permanent housing for their clients.

## Additional Resources

- [Sequential Intercept Model \(SAMHSA\)](#): This resource explains the Sequential Intercept Model, which details how individuals with mental health and substance use disorders come into contact with and move through the criminal justice system
- [Decriminalizing Homelessness \(HUD\)](#): This resource provides information on combatting community policies that criminalize homelessness and poverty
- [Policing and the Punitive Politics of Local Homelessness Policy \(Boston University Initiative On Cities\)](#): This resource provides important context to reduce punitive police responses to homelessness that undermine the impact of HOT teams and other partnerships
- [Thinking Outside the Box Webinar Series \(CSG\)](#): Webinars with tools for meaningful collaboration with housing, behavioral health, and other key partners to provide housing for people impacted by the CJS
- [Responding to Homelessness: Police-Mental Health Collaboration \(PMHC\) Toolkit \(Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. DOJ\)](#): This toolkit provides resources for law enforcement and partners to improve access to services for people with unmet behavioral health needs