

A [coordinated rehousing strategy](#) is key for communities working to leverage a significant influx of federal resources in order to address significant impacts of the pandemic such as an increase in the number of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and the vulnerability of many of those individuals and families to COVID-19. Creating cohorts, or groups with similar needs, is an important part of the planning process for building your community's overall rehousing strategy and ensuring it is responsive to local needs. This process is not meant to be used on an individual level to determine the specific needs of households currently experiencing homelessness or to impact referrals.

## Background

In order to develop an effective rehousing strategy, planners must first understand the needs in their community. People at risk of or experiencing homelessness come to the crisis response system with differing strengths, lived experiences, challenges, and resources. As such, the interventions (level and type of housing resources and services) that each household needs to stabilize or secure permanent housing can vary widely. In addition, systemic racism embedded in systems, processes, and practices ([including coordinated entry](#)) has driven and reinforced [deep inequities in housing, health, and other outcomes](#) experienced by Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color (BIPOC) as well as people from other historically marginalized groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)-identified people and people with disabilities. To be responsive to differing needs, including the unique challenges faced by people most impacted by systemic racism and other discrimination, communities must make a variety of interventions available and tailor their response and work to meet a wide range of needs.

For the purposes of creating a rehousing strategy, a **cohort** is:

*A group of individuals and/or households with similar characteristics, resources, and housing and service needs.*

Identifying cohorts can help Continuums of Care (CoCs) and other local leaders better understand the range of needs of people experiencing homelessness in their communities, as well as the mix of resources needed to obtain and maintain permanent housing. It is a process to understand the scope and scale of the interventions needed to address homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing cohorts is a planning strategy, not an attempt to prescribe the way that services and housing interventions are provided to individual households. It is a process to plan for needs and inventory at a system level and should not influence the way that individual referrals are made within your system. In addition, creating cohorts can help you to:

- Better understand the needs of people experiencing homelessness in your community, especially BIPOC, LGBTQ-identified people, and people with disabilities.
- Use an inclusive, person-centered approach to design or adapt your community's response to homelessness.<sup>1</sup> This can include allocating funding, designing and scaling interventions, and building partnerships in a way that will most effectively address the needs of people experiencing homelessness in your community, especially those from marginalized groups.
- Complete the [Rehousing and Coordinated Investment Planning Tool](#) (RCIPT), a framework designed to support communities in defining and quantifying their need for housing supports and services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and newly available funding streams. Contact your regional Technical Assistance (TA) provider for more information about the tool.

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<sup>1</sup> A person-centered approach: "...sees the people using health and social services as equal partners in planning, developing and monitoring care to make sure it meets their needs. This means putting people and their families at the center of decisions and seeing them as experts, alongside professionals to get the best outcome." (Health Innovation Network, [What is person-centred care and why is it important?](#))

The process of creating cohorts involves two key steps described below: analyzing needs and identifying cohorts. Throughout the process, partner with people most impacted by homelessness, systemic racism, and other discrimination when identifying needs, developing cohorts, and making decisions about resources by:

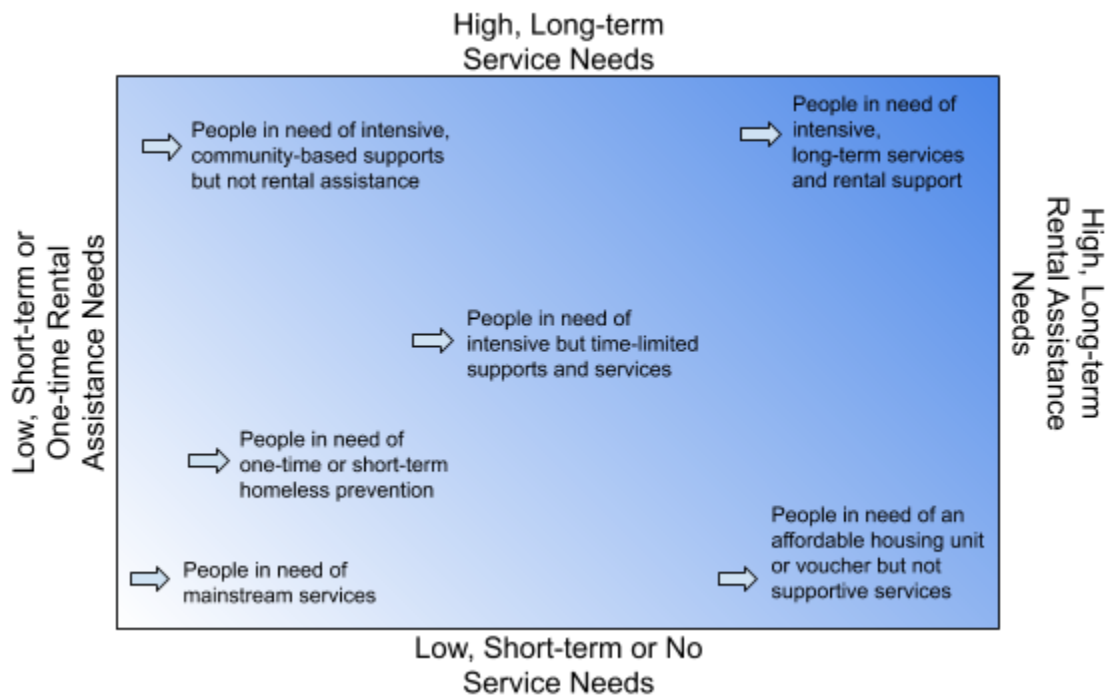
- **Creating an inclusive stakeholder group to engage in the process of creating cohorts.** This should include people with lived experience of homelessness, including BIPOC and other marginalized groups, key Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) and CoC decision-makers, as well as representatives from providers that manage a range of programs in your community, including ESG and CoC programs, homeless assistance and permanent housing programs, social services (benefits agencies, employment/workforce agencies, food/nutrition programs, etc.), culturally specific organizations, and [health centers](#) (especially [Health Care for the Homeless grantees](#)), among others.
- **Authentically engage people with lived experience of homelessness, especially BIPOC and other marginalized groups,** when collecting qualitative (descriptive, non-numerical) data to get a better understanding of needs. Use stakeholder interviews, focus groups, listening sessions, open-ended surveys, or other methods to obtain information about needs directly from the people most impacted by homelessness.

Taking these steps will help to reduce inequities that greatly impact BIPOC and other marginalized groups. By not centering the voices of people most impacted by homelessness and racial inequity, you risk deepening existing inequities and further limiting access to resources and opportunities for a healthy, stable life for the most marginalized and impacted people in your community.

## Analyze Needs

The people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in your community have a variety of different needs, lived experiences, and circumstances that they are both individually and collectively navigating, including:

- **Housing and services needs** (e.g., short-term rental assistance, long-term rental assistance, intensive support services, light-touch services to connect with community supports). See below for visual representation of example combinations of varying housing and service needs.



- **Characteristics** (e.g., family, individual, sheltered, unsheltered, employed, unemployed, senior, newly homeless, chronically homeless, veteran, fleeing domestic violence [DV]).
- **Resources and access to support networks** (e.g., access to social networks or resources, income).

Conduct a comprehensive, inclusive analysis of needs by implementing the following steps:

**Create a planning group** with stakeholders that can build a full picture of the needs of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in your community, identify or develop interventions to meet those needs, monitor the testing of these interventions on a pilot group, make adjustments as necessary, and then make recommendations and/or decisions about how to allocate funding. This group may consist of a single steering committee or other leadership group, or it may include subcommittees that focus on specific parts of the process. If the group includes subcommittees, each should include people with lived experience of homelessness and those most impacted by systemic racism and other discrimination.

**Use a variety of data sources**, both qualitative and quantitative, from within and outside of the homeless system to understand the needs of both people already in the system who are experiencing homelessness on the street, in shelters or safe havens, and in transitional housing, as well as people who are at risk of homelessness. See the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s [Data & Equity: Using the Data You Have](#) and USICH's [Navigating Homelessness and Housing Needs Data: Tailoring and Driving Local Solutions](#) for more details on data sources and how they can help you understand local needs. Keep in mind what the data sources and assessments were designed to do—there may be gaps or biases to consider in order to ensure that you get a true reflection of community needs. For example, some common coordinated entry (CE) tools and procedures have perpetuated racial inequities and communities may have work to do to [dismantle embedded racism in CE assessments and prioritization systems](#). Another example is that assessments used for CE may be designed to determine which households are in need of permanent supportive housing (PSH) and which are not, but they may not be able to determine the specific service needs of clients who do not need such intensive support.

**Collect qualitative data** (or review any, if it is available) around the needs of people experiencing homelessness from stakeholder interviews, focus groups, listening sessions, surveys, etc. with people with lived expertise as well as staff from provider agencies (such as case managers, housing navigators, and coordinated entry intake/assessment staff).<sup>2</sup> Any engagement with communities and individuals with lived experience of homelessness and those who have been impacted by systemic racism should operate under a trauma-informed approach and staff should be trained in these practices.

Other potential data sources and measures to explore include:

Potential Data Sources	Sample of Potential Data Measures to Explore
Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Race</li> <li>• Ethnicity</li> <li>• Veteran status</li> <li>• Disabling condition</li> <li>• Income and sources, including non-cash benefits</li> <li>• Current living situation (e.g., at-risk, unsheltered, in shelter, etc.)</li> <li>• Chronic homeless status</li> <li>• Past history of homelessness</li> <li>• Days homeless by population*</li> <li>• Exits by destination type*</li> <li>• Exits by pathway*</li> <li>• Average number of days homeless*</li> <li>• Returns to the homeless system*</li> </ul> <p>*The <a href="#">Stella Performance Module</a> (Stella P) provides dynamic, easy-to-use visuals to help illustrate these and data related to how people move through your system.</p>
CE System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerability tool scores</li> <li>• Crisis and housing needs assessments</li> <li>• Resources/networks available</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> [Education, Race, and Jobs in the COVID-19 Crisis](#)

HUD Consolidated Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characteristics linked with instability and an increased risk of homelessness</li> <li>• Characteristics and needs of low-income households at risk of homelessness</li> <li>• Summary, characteristics, and needs of special needs populations</li> </ul>
Systems Partner Data	<p>Information from systems partners such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culturally specific organizations</li> <li>• Public health/health centers</li> <li>• Behavioral health</li> <li>• Child welfare</li> <li>• Criminal justice</li> <li>• Juvenile justice</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• DV &amp; Trafficking</li> </ul>

**Look at race and ethnicity in all datasets** this information is available for and work to identify racial disparities. Analyze data closely with your inclusive stakeholder group, with an eye toward structural racism, poverty, and other drivers of homelessness; see [Data & Equity: Using the Data You Have](#) for suggestions. Consider how structural racism and other factors may drive needs and create barriers to housing and stability uncovered in your analysis.<sup>3</sup> For example, Black and Latinx households face unequal access to employment because of a number of factors driven by discrimination and structural racism; in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, they have been more likely to experience loss of employment income than White and Asian households. Such considerations are critical when making decisions about resources and priorities to ensure that decisions advance equity and do not compound existing inequities.

## Identify Cohorts and Interventions

As you analyze available data on the different needs of people experiencing homelessness, you should be able to see patterns emerge. Try to think beyond the standard ways your community may be grouping populations such as household type (youth, family, or individual) or subpopulation (chronic homelessness, veterans, families, youth, and survivors of DV). These are still important considerations that drive eligibility for certain resources, but adding other factors—such as whether a household is newly homeless or has no income—can help you identify more specific groups with unique needs. Work with your planning group to use this information to identify different groups of individuals/households with similar housing and service needs, characteristics, and access to (or lack of) resources and support networks, as well as which services and resources each cohort will likely need in order to stabilize or obtain housing. Intentionally work to keep bias, judgement, and stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness from influencing conversations and considerations about needs.<sup>4</sup>

Consider the intervention (level and duration of financial/rental assistance and services) that may be needed, as well as other resources. Focus on what the cohort needs in order to obtain, maintain, and stabilize housing rather than what resources your homelessness system currently has available and in what amount. Keep in mind that some cohorts have needs that may be best addressed through partnerships or referral relationships with community-based providers such as workforce development agencies, benefits agencies, healthcare providers, etc. Your final cohorts should combine the characteristics of a group with their needs. For example:

- Unsheltered individuals at risk of COVID-19 in need of intensive and long-term support to obtain and stabilize in housing.
- Newly homeless-sheltered families with an employed head of household in need of short-term, [light-touch support](#) to secure a new home.
- People at risk of homelessness who have access to networks and resources and may just need a referral to community-based [eviction prevention](#) or other services.

Analyze how cohorts break out in terms of race, ethnicity, and other factors and work to understand how needs within a given cohort may be different because of the additional barriers created by systemic racism (e.g., job and housing discrimination, higher prevalence of underlying health conditions, etc.). Communities should evaluate

<sup>3</sup>See [Equity as the Foundation](#) for more context.

<sup>4</sup>See [How to Check Your Unconscious Biases](#) for more context.

how any decisions related to cohorts, such as redesigning community inventory, modifying services, etc. can advance equity and reduce inequitable outcomes.

As accurately as possible, estimate the number of households in each cohort. For the purposes of creating an immediate rehousing strategy, an estimate of the current census is ideal. Information from HMIS or the latest Point-in-Time (PIT) count may be useful. For the purposes of system planning, consider using an annualized figure. Stella P’s System Performance Map page and other pages that break homeless counts out by household type and population groups can help inform annual estimates, although it is likely that not all cohorts you develop will be captured in the information in Stella P.

### Community Example

Below is an example of a few cohorts from a community that used [RCIPT](#). Using the tool, the community developed an overall “goal” around ensuring that single adults at risk of COVID-19 are quickly rehoused and out of congregate settings and, within that segment of their population, identified six cohorts, three of which are highlighted in the example. Please note that this example highlights just part of one group of a larger set of goals/cohorts developed by the community.

The “Potential Data Sources” column outlines the distinctive needs, characteristics, and resources/networks (or lack thereof) for each cohort. The “Sample Housing & Service Pathway Options” column displays the corresponding types and levels of housing and service supports given the needs of the particular cohort.

Potential Data Sources	# of HH	Sample Housing & Service Pathway Options
Single Adults in shelter at risk of COVID-19 who need to be quickly rehoused and taken out of congregate settings with access to family/support networks.	58	Emergency Shelter -> Non-Congregate Shelter (NCS) -> Rapid Exit
Chronically homeless Single Adults in shelter at risk of COVID-19 who need to be quickly rehoused and taken out of congregate setting and have a disabling condition.	117	Emergency Shelter -> NCS -> Rapid Rehousing (RRH) as a bridge -> PSH
Unsheltered Single Adults at risk of COVID-19 who need to be quickly rehoused with some income and employment history.	179	Street Outreach (unsheltered) -> RRH

### Next Steps

As demonstrated in the community example above, two key next steps after identifying cohorts and their needs are to understand which housing and services interventions they will be best served by and understand how funding can be allocated (or what additional funding is needed) in order to meet the needs in your community. [RCIPT](#) can help guide both steps. The tool provides space for you to identify the project types and service interventions that can meet the housing and service needs for each cohort and note the size of each cohort. The tool then helps guide communities through the process of cataloging new and existing resources to make strategic allocation decisions about which interventions the community will support and at what scale. Please contact your assigned Regional Technical Assistance team member for further support around using the [RCIPT](#).

In addition to being used for planning and resource allocation purposes, creating cohorts can help as you implement rehousing strategies in the COVID-19 environment by giving you a better understanding of how to more effectively target the right mix of housing and services resources to meet the needs of people from different cohorts. Changes may include updates to CE triage and prioritization policies and processes. Keep in mind that even with new funds no community has enough homeless system resources to serve everyone who is at risk of or experiencing homelessness; so, in making any changes, you must still focus on the households with the highest needs.

## Conclusion and Key Considerations

Engaging in the process of identifying cohorts with an inclusive stakeholder group that elevates the voices of people with lived experiences of homelessness, particularly BIPOC, can provide you with critical insights that can inform the way resources are allocated in your community and the mix of services and resources that you offer. Utilizing an inclusive planning approach and sustaining partnerships with people with lived experience of homelessness throughout the implementation, evaluation, and future work of your homeless system will position you to more effectively meet the needs in your community, resulting in better outcomes for the people experiencing homelessness. In order to maximize the benefits of engaging in the cohort creation process, keep a few key considerations in mind:

- Identify and work to understand the needs of all people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in your community, especially BIPOC and other marginalized groups—not just the populations that may be most visible to you at the moment. For example, people in NCS or people who are newly homeless or at risk due to the economic impact of COVID-19 may be two key groups at the top of your mind, but cohorts should also include groups such as people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, people at risk of homelessness, long-term shelter stayers, etc. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that BIPOC and people from other marginalized communities are present to varying degrees in each of these cohorts, and their needs may differ from others in a similar situation due to challenges related to the impact of systemic racism.
- Focus on the needs of the people in each cohort during the cohort creation process, instead of being driven by the interventions you currently have and the availability of specific resources. Once you identify needs through inclusive dialogue with people experiencing homelessness complemented by data analysis, you can use the information to inform plans to ensure your system has the capacity and right level and mix of resources and program models to meet the needs of the wide variety of people experiencing homelessness in your community.
- Center racial equity and the voices of those most impacted by homelessness when identifying needs, developing cohorts, and making decisions about resources. Doing so will help to reduce inequities that greatly impact BIPOC and people from other marginalized groups and bring your system closer to the goal of ensuring that all people have a safe, stable home in which to thrive.