



COVID-19

Homeless System Response: Holistic Investment Planning for State ESG Entitlements and Balance of State CoCs

Rural Homeless Services Delivery Systems in the Time of COVID-19

Rural communities are often challenged with limited resources and infrastructure for homeless services delivery. Where significant local funds are not invested into homeless services, communities are reliant on state Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) and Continuum of Care (CoC) Program funds to provide essential resources from street outreach to permanent housing. During the time of COVID-19, with the additional need for quarantine or isolation options, some of the existing challenges that rural homeless services delivery systems experience, such as limited shelter capacity, may be heightened. Successful responses in rural areas during the pandemic require ESG recipients to collaborate fully with partners. This includes representatives of the racial and ethnic groups most impacted by homelessness (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and people of color [BIPOC]) in the area as well as people with lived experience of homelessness. State recipients must thoughtfully design the coronavirus ESG (ESG-CV) allocation process according to existing needs in multiple localities.

The focus of ESG-CV funds on rehousing provides ESG recipients with the opportunity to align funding strategies in partnership with CoCs in the jurisdiction, especially the Balance of State (BoS) or statewide CoC, along with other stakeholders. While it is incumbent on state ESG recipients to quickly disburse ESG-CV funds, it is also critical to ensure that service coverage of remote and rural areas is implemented equitably, particularly in areas that are home to people who identify as historically underserved members of the community. Additionally, the ESG-CV notice effective September 1, 2020 provides additional time (up to 240 days) for the obligation of ESG-CV specifically to allow state recipients to identify and select new subrecipients.

Consider All Resources

As a start, stakeholders should understand the broad array of ongoing and COVID-19-specific resources available to assist in emergency response and recovery efforts related to the pandemic. Use the [Framework for COVID-19 Homelessness Response](#) to develop an understanding of the eligible activities for funding streams including Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), COVID-19 Community Development Block Grants (CDBG-CV), federal Coronavirus Relief Funds, US Department of Agriculture (USDA), HOME Investment Partnership Program (HOME), Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and other funds that may not have traditionally been leveraged by the state ESG recipient. Forming partnerships with the agencies that oversee these funds is a vital part of the process of identifying additional funding opportunities for local communities.

Use Data to Inform Your Funding Strategy

Use [data you already have](#) to establish the need for assistance and to create funding goals for allocating ESG-CV funds to specific interventions and targets for the number of households that will be moved out of homelessness. Identify metrics to determine the impact of COVID-19 on communities, such as the number of COVID-19 cases, number of COVID-19 related deaths, or jobs lost as a result of COVID-19. Using these metrics, identify the communities within the ESG geographic area that are most affected by COVID-19. The CDC has a [tool that identifies the number of coronavirus cases by county](#), and recipients can also work with state or local public health officials to get information about where COVID-19 cases have presented at a more granular level.

Compare COVID-19 data to [coordinated entry \(CE\) and Point-in-Time \(PIT\) count data](#) disaggregated by race to deepen your understanding of the impact of COVID-19 and homelessness by race. Work with the CoCs in the ESG jurisdiction to analyze available quantitative and qualitative data and confer with BIPOC and individuals with lived experience of homelessness to identify disparities in homelessness that can help to target interventions appropriately.

Collecting multiple sources of data is particularly important in rural areas where collecting accurate data can be particularly challenging. Host listening sessions with rural service providers and their partners (like the public library system and the faith community), people with lived expertise of homelessness, and culturally specific organizations to gain a better understanding of a community's holistic needs. [Learn more about engaging stakeholders in the coordinated investment process.](#)

It is essential to acknowledge the [adverse impact of COVID-19](#) and homelessness on BIPOC, especially Black Americans. [Data tools](#) in the U.S. Census Bureau website can help identify smaller communities and rural areas with a preponderance of people of color, including Black Americans. Review data and consider how these areas will be covered for ESG services in a culturally appropriate way. Centering BIPOC throughout the development and implementation of the funding strategy is essential to ensuring equitable housing outcomes.

ESG recipients can find additional information and assistance via [Disaster Response Rehousing resources](#), from a community's TA provider, or the HUD COVID-19 [resource page](#).

Establish and Enhance Working Relationships for Holistic Program Design and Service Delivery

Rural service providers rely on partnerships to provide complementary and holistic services for people experiencing homelessness. In the wake of COVID-19, coordination across stakeholders is even more critical. Work within the existing CoC structure to complement—not reinvent—efforts to assist people experiencing homelessness with COVID diagnoses, symptoms, and those who are medically fragile. ESG recipients should solidify partnerships with the CoCs in the ESG jurisdiction to align program and service delivery goals. Specifically, ESG recipients should coordinate rehousing efforts across the geography of the entitlement with the CoCs, as well as prioritization for [CE](#). [View guidance for making these changes using an equity lens, as well as a link to community examples.](#)

Some stakeholder coordination suggestions include:

- Setting up a service provider peer network.
- Facilitating learning opportunities or formal partnerships between large and small service providers to increase organizational capacity and equitable outreach and service coverage.
- Creating partnerships to allow larger organizations to serve as mentors to new ESG subrecipients or as a financial intermediary to agencies providing on the ground services.

Get Creative with Your Funding Strategies

[Engage with a wide range of stakeholders](#) to inform your coordinated investment plan. Additional understanding of the diverse range of issues helps design a more effective and representative strategy to end homelessness.

Take advantage of the regional planning structure if your BoS or statewide CoC has one. The leadership and organization of efforts established through this entity can help identify local needs and ensure service coverage of rural areas within the ESG geography.

Coordinate with other ESG Entitlements within the state. Communicating about funding priorities with other direct ESG recipients in the state supports the availability of holistic and complementary services for people experiencing homelessness across the state during the pandemic.

Establish and strengthen relationships with both large and small partner organizations as potential subrecipients of ESG-CV funds. Conduct outreach to [Community Action Agencies](#) regarding application opportunities for their geographic reach, intake capabilities, and access to CSBG funds for wrap-around services. In addition, extend ESG-CV [funding opportunities to culturally specific organizations](#) to serve people who may not present for assistance at larger organizations, but are affected by homelessness and COVID-19.

Many communities are receiving substantially more funding than ever before and are trying to cover large geographies. Thoughtful planning on the front end will produce a better plan to serve those with the greatest needs and ensure that equitable outcomes are achieved.