



City of Sonoma

Agenda Item Summary

Meeting: City Council - 03 May 2023

Department

Administration

Staff Contact

Lisa Janson, Senior Management Analyst

Agenda Item Title

Receive Sonoma Valley's Three-Year Action Plan to End Homelessness from the City's Homelessness Consultant Andrew Hening and Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action to Adopt the Plan

Summary

On March 16, 2022, City Council adopted a resolution authorizing the interim City Manager to hire a homeless expert consultant Andrew Hening who would evaluate all the homeless services being offered in Sonoma and Sonoma Valley, by assessing how these services were working for the local homeless community in conjunction with Sonoma County's (County) Continuum of Care objectives. On June 15, 2022, he presented his findings to City Council, below were the key take-aways that have paved the way for the work leading up to this point.

- Homelessness is a regional as well as City issue.
- Given regional, state, and national best practices for addressing homelessness, the local system of care could be more effectively configured,
- The most immediate problem, as in the case in many communities, is insufficiently supporting people experiencing chronic homelessness
- Any future progress will be dependent on creating a strong foundational structure for collaboration.

Over the last year the consultant has brought our homeless service providers (Homeless Action Sonoma, Sonoma Overnight Support, FISH, Sonoma Valley Community Health Center, Sonoma Police and Sonoma Valley Fire District) together in by-weekly meetings where they continue to build Sonoma Valley's "by-name-list" of people currently experiencing homelessness. This type of by-name-list case conferencing is becoming a national best practice for coordinating on-the-street care.

By using this by-name-list methodology, when the project first started in November, we were able to determine that only approximately 10% of the total unhoused population in Sonoma Valley were accounted for in the County's "Coordinated Entry" System. It is important to note that until individuals are in that system, they are not able to access countywide homelessness and housing resources.

Mr. Hening has been instrumental in partnering with our local homeless service providers to ensure the implementation and coordination of the case conferencing services here in Sonoma Valley, which will ultimately help more people access the resources they need to end their homelessness. It's this effort that has established a closer working relationship with the County and aided in providing shared services to this vulnerable population. Working with this same group he has developed a strategic action plan to end homelessness here in Sonoma Valley.

Mr. Hening will present the three-year strategic plan to end homelessness in Sonoma Valley. It is important to note that the plan being presented aligns with the County's strategic plan to

end homelessness. If adopted by City Council, staff will ensure there is funding in the FY 23/24 budget to support these efforts and City Council will have the opportunity during the budget workshops to approve the funding.

Recommended Council Action

City staff recommends that City Council approves the resolution adopting *Sonoma Valley's Three-Year Action Plan to End Homelessness: A Pathway to a Coordinated & Housing-Focused System* which aligns with the County's strategic plan to end homelessness.

Alternative Actions

City Council's discretion.

Financial Impact

For FY22/23, there is no impact. If the strategic plan is adopted City staff will work with the current service providers to develop contracts for services. Costs associate with these agreements will be included in FY 23/24 budget. The City has applied for Measure O funding to help cover 50% of the by name list coordinator position and the City has been recommended to receive \$134,000 in funding to cover two-years of this position. The final approval of the Measure O funding will go to the Board of Supervisors for the final vote this month.

Environmental Review

- Environmental Impact Report
- Negative Declaration
- Exempt
- Not Applicable

Status

- Approved/Certified
- No Action Required
- Action Requested

Attachments

[Resolution](#)
[Sonoma Valley Homeless Action Plan - FINAL \(002\)](#)

Alignment with Council Goals:

Compliance with Climate Action 2020 Target Goals:

CC:

n/a

City of Sonoma

RESOLUTION # ____ - 2023

A RESOLUTION OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF SONOMA, CALIFORNIA ADOPTING SONOMA VALLEY'S THREE-YEAR ACTION PLAN TO END HOMELESSNES: A PATHWAY TO A COORDINATED AND HOUSING-FOCUSED SYSTEM

WHEREAS, homelessness is a regional as well as a City issue; and,

WHEREAS, City staff are not experts on homelessness, and as there is limited time available to devote to this critical concern, utilizing a consultant, who has the expertise to evaluate all the services currently offered in Sonoma, as well as the Valley and assess how the Continuum of Care is working for the homeless community, helped the City to make critical informed decisions; and,

WHEREAS, the City of Sonoma hired Andrew Hening, Consulting, LLC, to evaluate all the homelessness programs that are currently offered in the City and the Valley, collaboratively worked with current community providers and stakeholders, and then provided recommendations so that Staff and City Council could make decisions regarding homelessness programs; and,

WHEREAS, Andrew Hening presented the findings of his report on homelessness services at a City Council meeting on June 15, 2022; and,

WHEREAS, the report outlined three key findings: Finding #1 Given regional, state, and national best practices for addressing homelessness, the local system of care could be more effectively configured, Finding #2 The most immediate problem, as is the case in many communities, insufficiently supporting people experiencing chronic homelessness and and Finding #3 Any future progress would be dependent on creating a strong foundational structure for collaboration; and,

WHEREAS, Andrew Hening has played a crucial role in coordinating the by-name-list of homeless individuals here in Sonoma Valley, has worked diligently to pull our homeless service providers together and has encourage collaboration and organized the by-weekly meetings; and,

WHEREAS, by using the by-name-list methodology and ensuring all individuals who are homeless here in Sonoma Valley are part of the County's "coordinated care" system, the City and County are working together and leveraging services for the care of the most vulnerable population in the City of Sonoma and the Valley; and

WHEREAS, this was part of a longer term strategy to end homelessness here in Sonoma Valley, with the goal to identify service gaps and plug into outside providers to help serve the homeless in Sonoma and the Valley; and

WHEREAS, over the previous 12-months Andrew Hening Consultant LLC has worked to assess the issues affecting homelessness in Sonoma Valley and has developed a strategic plan and presented the strategic plan to the City Council for adoption.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, by the City Council of the City of Sonoma, that the City Council adopts the strategic homelessness plan- *Sonoma Valley's Three-Year Action Plan to End Homelessness: A Pathway to a Coordinated & Housing -Focused System*

PASSED AND ADOPTED at a Regular Meeting of the City Council on this 3rd day of May 2023, by the following vote:

AYES:

NOES:

ABSENT:

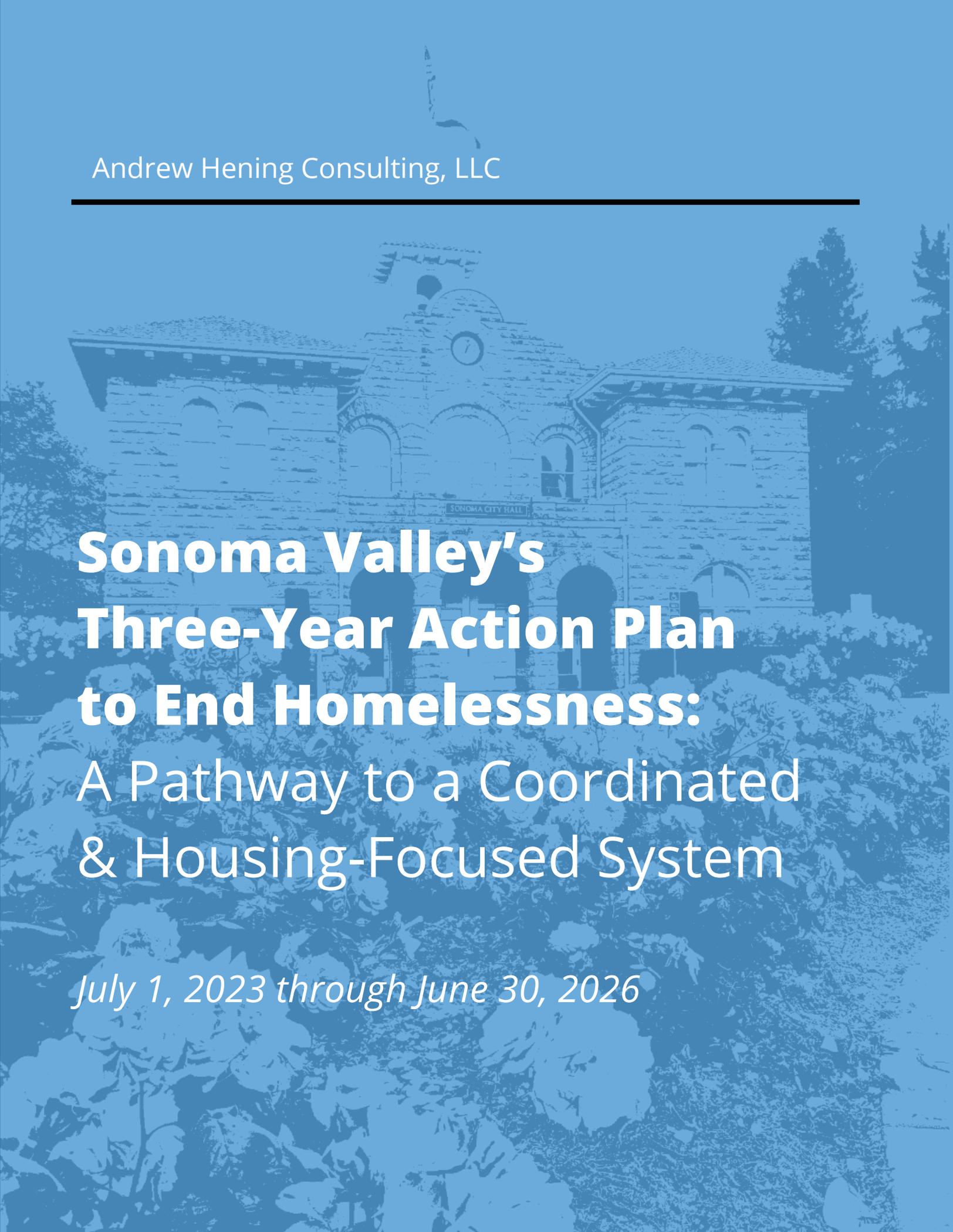
ABSTAIN:

Sandra Lowe, Mayor

ATTEST:

Rebekah Barr, MMC, City Clerk

Andrew Hening Consulting, LLC



**Sonoma Valley's
Three-Year Action Plan
to End Homelessness:**
A Pathway to a Coordinated
& Housing-Focused System

July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2026

Acknowledgements

This Action Plan would not have been possible without the many local service providers, people with lived experience of homelessness, and community stakeholders who participated and provided valuable input for its development. Thank you!

About This Action Plan

This Action Plan seeks to provide a practical roadmap for strengthening Sonoma Valley's current system of care for people experiencing homelessness. For more general context, the Plan opens with an analysis of what's driving our nation's current homelessness crisis. It then highlights how these large-scale trends are playing out in Sonoma Valley and, in some cases, are being exacerbated by unique, local conditions. From there, the Plan describes how to think about building an effective homeless system of care, which then leads to an evaluation of our current response. Finally, the Plan concludes with an actionable implementation framework for rapidly building an even more effective and sustainable local system in the coming years.

Author's Note

At times this report will likely feel much broader than the Sonoma Valley. That's deliberate. "The Modern Homelessness Crisis" is a complex, systemic problem that is playing out in cities, counties, and metropolitan regions all across our country. Solving this crisis requires a more holistic view of both its upstream causes and the predictable ways in which local communities either effectively or ineffectively respond.

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Part I. The Modern Homelessness Crisis

Our country is currently experiencing a unique socioeconomic phenomenon called “The Modern Homelessness Crisis.” It is generally characterized by the destabilizing effects of growing economic inequality and an inability to provide sufficient long-term care for people with disabling health conditions.

Seeing the System

Homelessness is simultaneously very simple and very complex.

On one hand, the solution is in the name itself. To quote Lloyd Pendleton, the Director of Salt Lake City's Homeless Task Force, which over a 10-year period reduced long-term homelessness by 72%, "We gave homes to homeless people. It's simple. You give them housing, and you end homelessness."

While Mr. Pendleton's insight is certainly true, if you talk to anyone who has worked on this issue for an extended period of time, they will likely tell you that homelessness isn't simple at all. In fact, it is extremely challenging and complex.

Homelessness is typically framed as an individual problem. After all, it is almost always precipitated by some type of individual or household crisis – a job loss, an eviction, a health crisis, domestic violence, or some other relational issue.

Importantly, however, beyond any singular event, the likelihood that a personal crisis will result in an episode of homelessness is ultimately dependent on an even wider array of factors – labor market trends, the real estate industry, healthcare policy, patterns of systemic racism, family dynamics and social capital.

The only way to make sense of all this complexity, to have any hope of sorting through the ever-shifting tug between individual circumstances and societal influences, is to begin to view homelessness as a systemic problem.

As MIT professor Donella Meadows put it in her seminal book *Thinking in Systems*:

Hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, unemployment, chronic disease, drug addiction, and war ... persist in spite of the analytical ability and technical brilliance that have been directed toward eradicating them. No one deliberately creates those problems, no one wants them to persist, but they persist nonetheless. That is because they are intrinsically systems problems – undesirable behaviors characteristic of the system structures that produce them.

In the same way that the design of and interactions within a community might hasten or prevent the spread a pandemic, or the structure and shape of political institutions might increase or decrease the effectiveness of a government, the

socioeconomic dynamics in a given society play a significant role in either increasing or decreasing the likelihood that individual crises will result in homelessness.

This isn't just an abstract musing. We can test whether this statement is true.

If broader socioeconomic factors influence the extent to which people experience homelessness, then as socioeconomic conditions change, we would expect the nature of homelessness to change too. And that is precisely what has happened over our nation's history.

From migratory labor (i.e., "hobos") roaming the country in the early 1900s in search of economic opportunity in rapidly urbanizing cities to the sprawling encampments and "Hoovervilles" resulting from the Great Depression, there have been multiple episodes of widespread homelessness during our nation's history.

Most recently, **beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of long-term socioeconomic trends in the United States, including rising housing costs, declining real wages, the ongoing impact of systemic racism, and insufficient health supports for people with mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and other disabling health conditions have had the cumulative impact of reducing the economic capacity of the most vulnerable among us. This economic vulnerability, in turn, has made it much more likely that individual or household crises will result in an episode of homelessness.**

One of the clearest ways to see this vulnerability is to look at the steadily rising cost of living for renters. According to research from Harvard University, between 1960 to 2016, adjusting for inflation, the median American rent payment rose 61% while the median renter's income increased by only 5%.¹

This pattern is even more acute in Sonoma County. In 2021 alone, there was a 12.9% year-over-year increase in the median countywide rental price.² By comparison, the median household income only increased by 6%.³

For Sonoma County residents with "extremely low incomes," the situation has become dire (ELI households are those households earning less than 30% of the area median income). A staggering 70% of ELI households are spending more than half of their disposable income on housing costs, which is one of the highest rates across the nine Bay Area counties.⁴

Importantly, by using systems thinking to observe the broader historical context of the past 40 years, we can more easily see how recent “shocks” like the Great Recession and the COVID-19 Pandemic, which have each certainly made homelessness worse in their own rights, are more accurately understood as exacerbations of deeper, more underlying problems, such as economic inequality.

When trying to unpack complex issues like homelessness, systems maps can help to depict the various factors at play and, more importantly, show how seemingly disparate elements are actually interconnected. To that end, the systems map on the following page seeks to represent the underlying dynamics driving The Modern Homelessness Crisis. Each box represents a different issue that in some way contributes to modern homelessness, and the arrows show how these different nodes are interconnected.

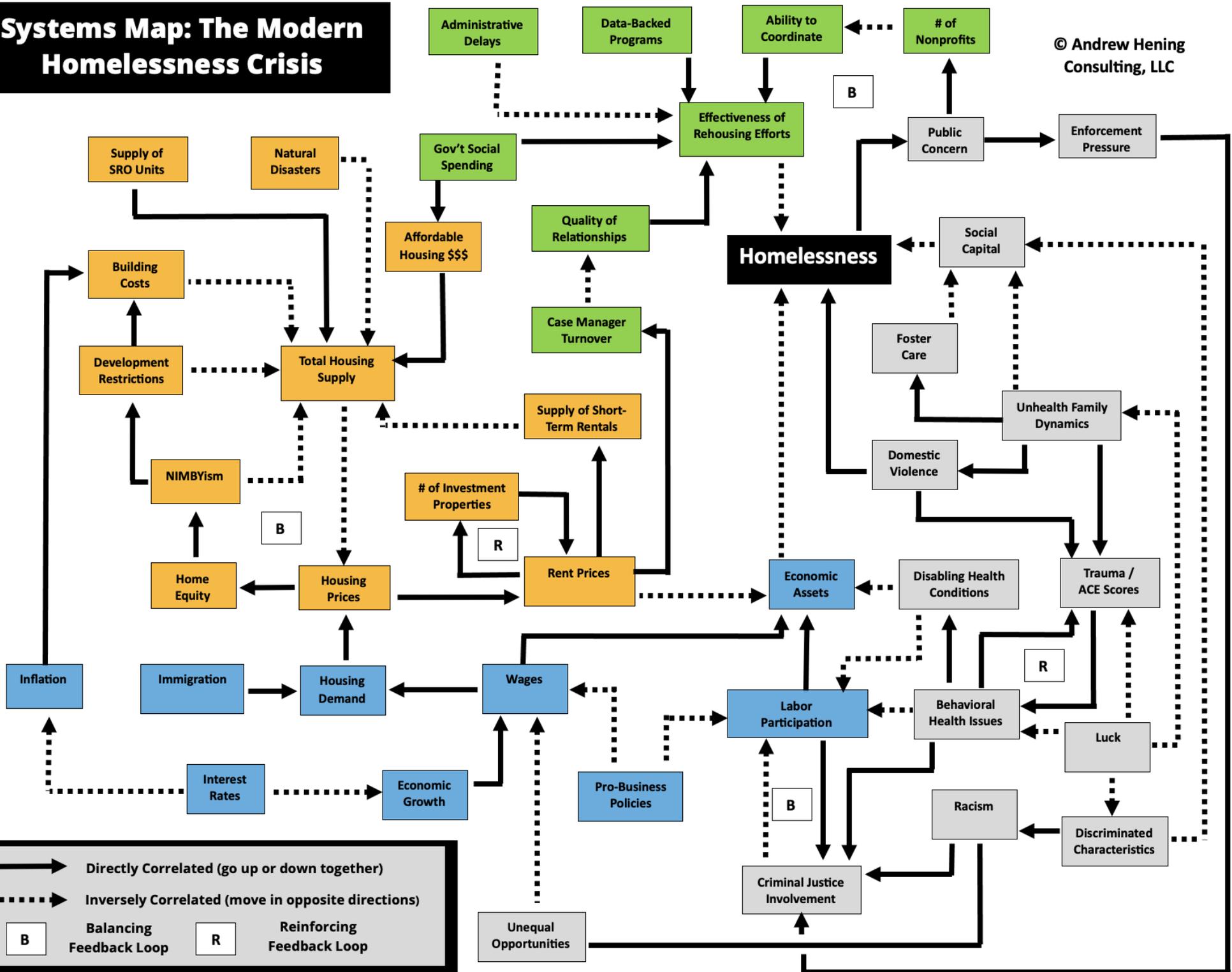
Interpreting the nature of interconnectedness is critical:

1. First, systems maps should show causation, which should be represented by the direction of the arrows connecting different issues. For example, on the following map we see “administrative delays” and “data-backed programs” both pointing towards and influencing “effectiveness of rehousing efforts.”
2. Second, systems maps should then show how elements are correlated. A solid arrow means the issues are directly correlated. In other words, as issue X goes up, issue Y also goes up (or if issue X goes down, issue Y also goes down). For example, on the following map, as “homelessness” goes up, “public concern” goes up, or as “homelessness” goes down, “public concern” goes down. By comparison, a dotted arrow means the issues are inversely correlated. In other words, as issue X goes up, issue Y goes down (or as issue X goes down, issue Y goes up). For example, on the following map, as the “number of nonprofits” goes up, the “ability to coordinate” goes down, or as the “number of nonprofits” goes down, the “ability to coordinate” goes up.
3. Finally, it can be helpful to group and color-code related elements. For example, on the following map housing-related issues are yellow, economic issues are blue, relational and health issues are grey, and features of our response to homelessness are green.

The critical point here is that the likelihood and duration of homelessness is profoundly shaped by the issues and dynamics represented on this map.

Systems Map: The Modern Homelessness Crisis

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Predictable Responses

Importantly, even though these societal factors are playing out all across the country, since the dawn of The Modern Homelessness Crisis, local communities (cities, counties) have been largely left to their own devices to figure out how to respond. While there is some limited funding, policy guidance, and programmatic white papers from State and Federal agencies, there has never been a strong, unified, or accountability-driven strategy binding and ensuring consistent and effective local responses. This has led to three major challenges:

#1 A Reluctance to Act

INSIGHT	Local communities often perceive it to be in their selfish, short-term interest to do as little as possible to solve homelessness, which ends up hurting them in the long-term.
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Without a strong State or Federal strategy encouraging and/or compelling collective action across communities, many times the local pressure is to simply push the problem out of sight and out of mind. This approach is often fueled by the seemingly pervasive and pernicious belief that people experiencing homelessness are not from a given community. Indeed, as the reasoning goes, if a local community expands its social safety net, then it will simply create a magnet effect that leads to even more homelessness.

Importantly, the data consistently shows that the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness in a given community lost their housing in that community. For example, seven of the nine Bay Area counties do track the origin of an individual’s homelessness in their Point-in-Time Counts (more about this on Page 16). In these communities, 70-87% of people report that they were already living in that county when they became homeless.⁵ Long-term data from the State of California further reinforces this, showing that 96% of people experiencing homelessness in California only access services in one community.⁶

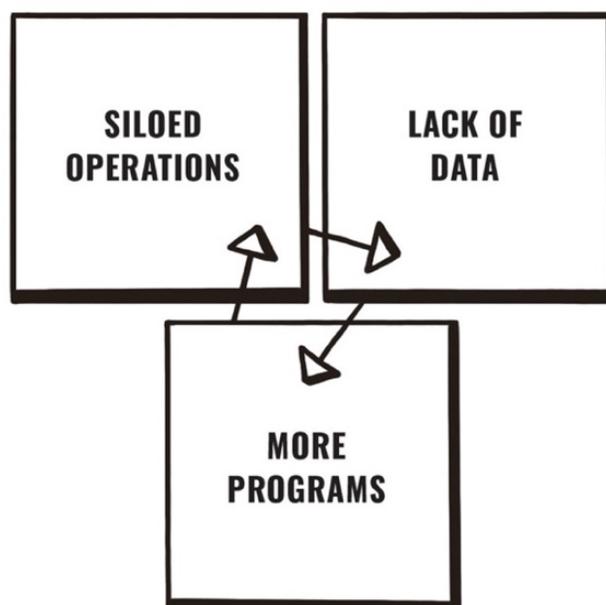
If anything, the relatively higher rates of homelessness in Coastal California communities like the Bay Area are the result of a particularly strong concentration of the societal forces detailed on the previous page.

#2 Siloed Social Service Systems

INSIGHT	Many communities end up with well-intentioned but uncoordinated homeless service systems whose structural inefficiencies can perpetuate the very problems they are intended to solve.
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Even when communities do find the courage to act, it can be difficult to know how to proceed. This is particularly true when service systems become increasingly large and uncoordinated. When this happens, structural inefficiencies often emerge that make solving homelessness even harder than it already is. Specifically:

- “Silos” can form when departments, organizations, or agencies operate independently without sharing information or coordinating activities.
- When communities are uncoordinated and lack the ability to share data, it’s impossible to effectively measure what works and what does not.
- Without a process for determining what works and what doesn’t and investing accordingly, when it appears that existing programs and services are not meeting the need, many communities default to creating new programs and organizations, thus perpetuating and exacerbating the cycle.



#3 Misallocated Investment

INSIGHT	Solving The Modern Homelessness Crisis requires addressing two different problems: providing short-term assistance for people who experience financial shocks and providing long-term care for people suffering from disabling health conditions.
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Aside from structural inefficiencies, for communities that do choose to respond, a second issue often emerges. It stems from not fully understanding the way The Modern Homelessness Crisis manifests itself.

At the risk of oversimplifying what is clearly a very complex experience, the issues detailed on Page 10 are generally leading to two different types of homelessness:

- For most people, homelessness is a relatively short-term occurrence primarily driven by financial and relational crises (e.g., eviction, job loss, divorce, DV).
- For a small but persistent minority, it is a long-term experience exacerbated by disabling conditions (e.g., physical health, behavioral health, traumatic brain injuries).

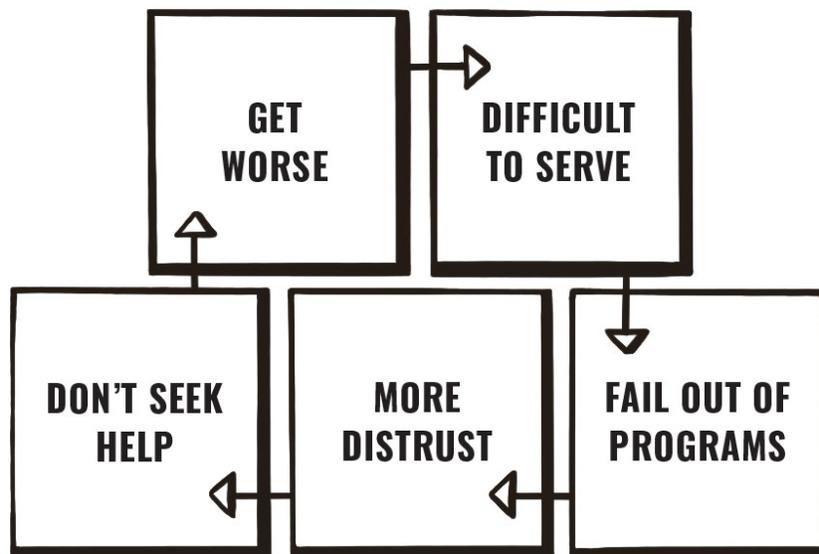
When communities fail to distinguish between short-term homelessness and long-term chronic homelessness, the result is often costly and ineffective systems of care, primarily because:

- Adding programs and services that don't address chronic homelessness will not necessarily improve conditions on the street.
- Cheaper housing and an improved cost of living are major aspects of solving the Modern Homelessness Crisis, but they won't necessarily solve chronic homelessness.
- If short-term homelessness isn't sufficiently addressed, it can lead to chronic homelessness.

- Throwing “short-term” solutions at chronic homelessness will likely produce more distrust (i.e., without the right ongoing support, people will likely not see “the system” as a source of help).
- Throwing “long-term” solutions at short-term homelessness is wasteful and inefficient (e.g., should a one-time job loss lead to lifelong subsidized housing?).

Beyond logistical considerations, there is a critical moral and ethical dimension to this. People experiencing chronic homelessness are some of the most vulnerable people in our communities, languishing unnecessarily on the streets for years, even decades. Studies have even found that, on average, people experiencing long-term homelessness die 20+ years earlier than their housed peers, primarily from untreated chronic illnesses.⁷

Importantly, this is also the type of homelessness, as exemplified by issues like encampments, that tends to generate significant community concern.



Part II. Homelessness in the Sonoma Valley

While the trends driving The Modern Homelessness Crisis are playing out all across the country, particularly in our most vibrant metropolitan areas, every community faces its own unique challenges and nuances.

Local Nuance

In addition to the factors described in the last section, the Sonoma Valley is facing a variety of additional local issues that are in many ways exacerbating these broader socioeconomic trends. For example:

- Due to the Sonoma Valley's economic reliance on seasonal industries like tourism and agriculture, many residents struggle during slower and wetter winter months.
- Tourism has also contributed to short-term rentals and second homes, which have further reduced the supply of housing and driven up costs for year-round residents. The local housing vacancy rate, which measures the number of unoccupied homes in the community, is 20% higher than the county average.⁸
- Like the rest of Sonoma County, Sonoma Valley is acutely at risk from wildfires, which not only threaten local lives but also further jeopardize the local housing inventory.
- Jurisdictionally, the Sonoma Valley runs north / south from Kenwood on Highway 12 to Highway 37 on the San Pablo Bay, and there is ambiguity around City and County roles and responsibilities (e.g., geographic boundaries, charters), which further complicates roles and responsibilities.

These issues provide important qualitative context about what's driving homelessness in our community, and from a strategic planning perspective, the critical next step is then analyzing what this all means in terms of the on-the-ground level of need.

Quantifying the Need

There are three primary strategies communities use to determine the level of need among people experiencing homelessness. The first strategy is called the "Homeless Point-in-Time Count" (PIT).

In order to receive federal funding, every two years the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires communities to conduct a census of every person experiencing homelessness at a given moment in time.

The count is usually done in January because it is thought that emergency shelter utilization rates are the highest during the winter, thus making it easier to find people. HUD also requires follow up surveying to gather demographic information.

According to Sonoma County's most recent PIT, as of January 2022, there were 2,893 people experiencing homelessness on a given day in Sonoma County, 122 of whom were in the Sonoma Valley. 29 were sheltered and 93 were unsheltered.

In practice, the PIT is only as accurate as the canvassing efforts on the day of the count, and this means it is almost universally considered to be an undercount. For example, studies have shown that enumerators fail to identify "plants" (i.e., researchers posing as people experiencing homelessness) up to 40% of the time.⁹ In some communities, if people who were in jail or hospitals the day of the count but who would have otherwise been homeless were identified, the PIT could be 25-60% higher still.¹⁰

The second strategy for determining the level of need in a given community is to create what is referred to as a "By-Name-List" (BNL). Compared to the PIT, the BNL is able to incorporate the knowledge of local service providers, as well as law enforcement and other community partners. Because of this, the BNL is a much more accurate tool for determining who needs help, especially among people experiencing more medium to long-term homelessness.

Since the fall of 2022, a team of local partners, including the City of Sonoma, the County of Sonoma, Homeless Action Sonoma, Sonoma Overnight Support, FISH, the Sonoma Valley Community Health Center, HomeFirst, and Interfaith Shelter Network, has been meeting on a bi-weekly basis to identify, by-name, the most visible and vulnerable people experiencing long-term homelessness in the Sonoma Valley. As of April 2023, there were approximately 80 individuals on our local BNL.

Importantly, the vision, strategy, and focus areas described later in this Plan are rooted in our local BNL process and data.

The third and final strategy for determining the level of need is to use data from the Homeless Management Information System, or as it's more commonly known, HMIS.

The federal government requires local communities receiving homelessness funding to track client-level data and outcomes in HMIS, which is an online database where local organizations and case managers can document program enrollment, service engagement, and case notes.

Similar to the BNL, HMIS is able to account for people who are engaging with the system but might not have been identified during the PIT. Generally speaking, HMIS does a great job of tracking countywide data, but it cannot provide community-level numbers specific to Sonoma Valley in the way the PIT or BNL can. The data is also only as good as the number of people who are enrolled in the system.

For example, when local providers started the Sonoma Valley BNL meeting, just 2% of people on the BNL were in HMIS. Fortunately, thanks to this new forum for coordination, within a few short months, that number jumped to 41%.

Literal Homelessness vs. Precarious Housing

There is one final wrinkle when it comes to quantifying homelessness, which stems from the definition of homelessness itself. This is of particular importance for the Sonoma Valley, given the wide range of ways in which local residents are experiencing housing insecurity.

HUD defines “literal” homelessness as “an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This means that when communities conduct their PIT counts, enumerators are looking for people living on the street, in parks, in encampments, in abandoned buildings, in libraries or other public spaces, and in vehicles (cars, RVs, boats).

Critically, this definition excludes the following arrangements, which are generally referred to as “precarious housing”:

- Couch-surfing (i.e., sleeping on a friend or family member’s couch)
- Spending the night in a motel or hotel but would otherwise be homeless
- Overcrowded housing (i.e., multiple families sharing a housing unit)

Past efforts to quantify homelessness in the Sonoma Valley have tended to conflate literal homelessness and precarious housing. While this has come from a good and

well-intentioned place, **the vast majority of homeless systems of care tend to view precarious housing as a symptom of poverty and a risk factor of homelessness, rather than being homelessness itself.** In other words, most homeless systems of care tend to direct homelessness prevention assistance towards people in precarious housing, particularly as crises emerge; whereas, more traditional homeless services, such as emergency shelter, outreach, and day services like showers and laundry, are generally targeted towards people who are literally homeless. **The recommendations in this report are intended to help create the optimal local response to literal homelessness.**

To put hard numbers to all of this:

- 66% of *all* renters in some parts of the Sonoma Valley are rent burdened, paying more than 30% of their income on housing.¹¹ This has resulted in significant overcrowding with, in some extreme cases, as many as 26 people sharing one rental unit.
- 92% of farm worker families do not earn enough to meet their basic needs,¹² and a recent report commissioned by the Catalyst Fund found that 8,000 of the Valley's 40,000 residents experience food insecurity throughout the year.¹³
- Despite the enormity of these challenges, *at any given moment*, approximately 80 people are experiencing homelessness, and *over the course of a year*, local providers report serving upwards of 200 unique individuals.
- For people the 80 people experiencing literal homelessness at any given moment, the overwhelming majority are unsheltered, with approximately 50% residing in their vehicles.
- An even smaller group of approximately a dozen are people experiencing long-term, chronic homelessness who are also "high utilizers" of local emergency services, such as police, fire, EMS, and the emergency room.

Part III. Analyzing Our Current Response

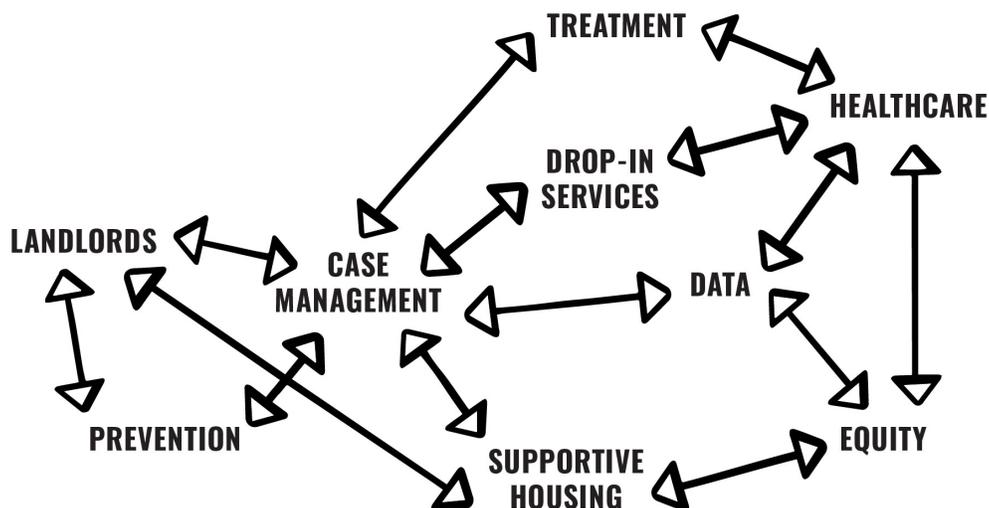
In theory, homelessness should be relatively simple to solve. It requires decreasing the inflow of people into the experience of homelessness while increasing the outflow of people back to permanent housing. Operationally, however, even with a seemingly straightforward strategy, it is often extremely difficult and challenging to put the pieces together to form an effective homeless response system.

The Status Quo

Many communities struggle to build effective homeless response systems. This is driven by a variety of factors:

- **Funding & Resources** – There are a variety of funders, philosophies, processes, requirements, timelines, and expected outcomes.
- **Agencies, Programs & People** – Organizations responding to homelessness have a variety of different missions, strategies, and cultures, as well as a range of mindsets, practices, and effectiveness levels across staff members.
- **Public Perception** – The pressure to act often leads to investments in short-term fixes vs. long-term solutions.
- **Accountability** – No one entity is inherently responsible for homelessness, which can lead to unproductive dynamics like cities vs. counties, provider vs. provider, or neighborhood vs. neighborhood.
- **Data & Credentialing** – Without effective data gathering processes or credentialing bodies, program effectiveness can vary widely within and across communities.

Because of these issues, many local responses to homelessness end up as a jumbled and uncoordinated constellation of programs and services, not a true system of care.



STEP

STEP is a framework that has been developed by Andrew Hening Consulting, LLC to bring shared understanding to the way a homeless system of care can and should fit together. It was originally conceived as a “customer journey map” illustrating the ways in which people experiencing homelessness tend to flow through these systems.

Beyond creating a common context and vocabulary for homelessness planning, the long-term goal of this framework is to establish programmatic benchmarks and best practices for each service area (and the connections between and among services areas). From a strategic planning perspective, aligning to these benchmarks can then help to prioritize investments and policy focus areas.

S: Societal

- These are the national, regional, and local societal forces increasing the likelihood and duration of homelessness.
- The most effective strategy for solving The Modern Homelessness Crisis is to reform these issues, and local communities should be constantly evaluating what policy levers they can pull to improve these conditions.

T: Triage

- “Triage” occurs when someone is at immediate risk-of or has just become homeless.
- It includes **“prevention”**, or literally trying to stop an episode of homelessness from happening. It also includes **“diversion”**, which is trying to find rapid housing solutions outside of the traditional homeless service system (e.g., reconnecting a person with family or friends). Importantly, given the often finite and limited capacity of homeless services, diversion can and should happen throughout every part of the system of care.

E: Engagement

- If a household does become homelessness, “Engagement” is the process of connecting with a person to chart a path back to housing.

- Engagement includes the **administration & coordination** that supports data sharing, case conferencing, and other service navigation processes.
- It also includes **outreach** and **drop-in / basic needs** services (e.g., food, hygiene, laundry) designed to connect with people who are primarily unsheltered.
- Finally, it includes **shelter** placements, which are an interim step on the way back to permanent housing.

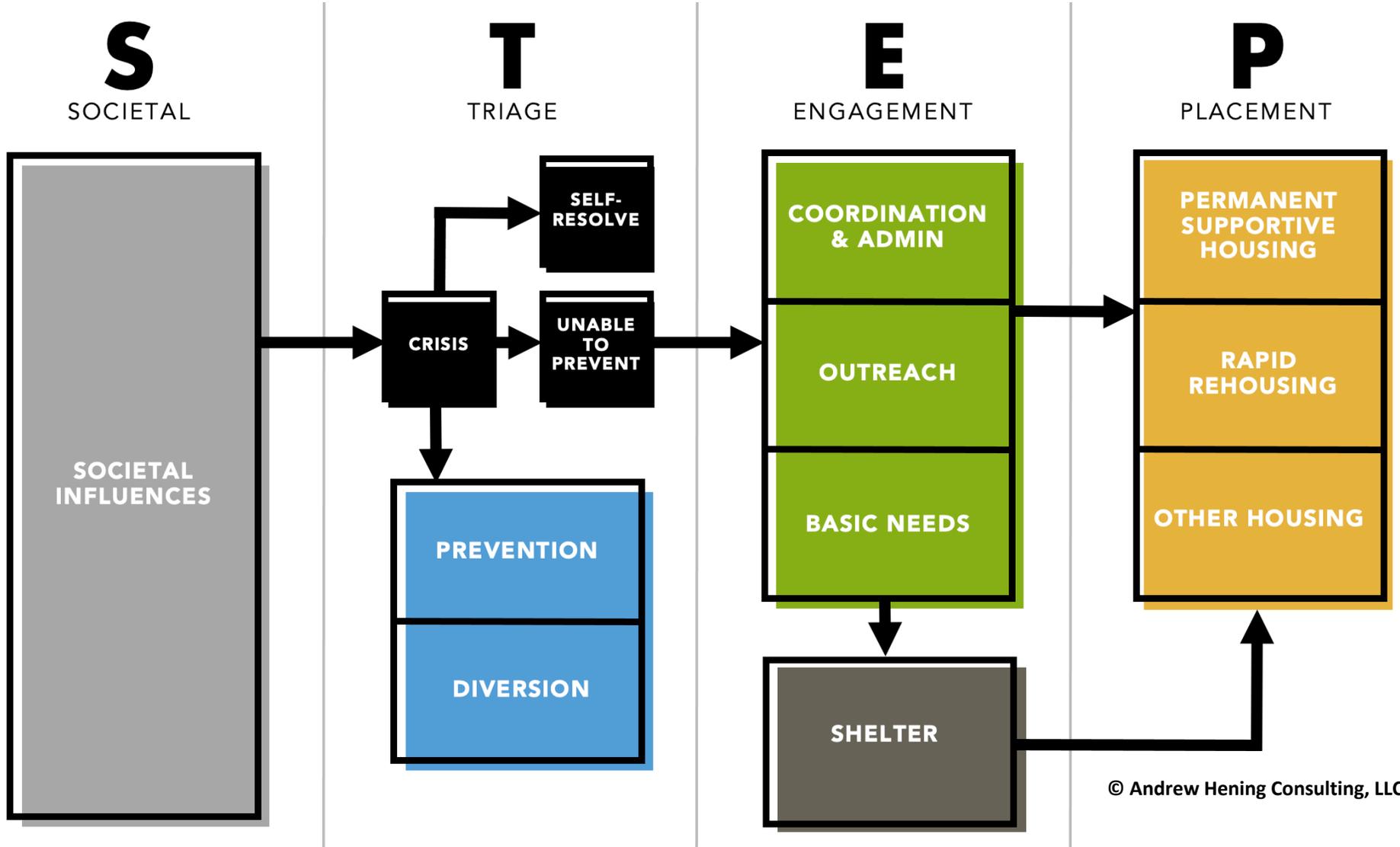
P: Placement

- “Placement” is the goal of the entire system – it’s getting people back into permanent housing as quickly as possible.
- It includes “**permanent supportive housing**” (PSH), the data driven solution to chronic homelessness, and I also includes “**rapid rehousing**” (RRH), a time-bound case management and housing intervention for people with lower levels of acuity.
- Finally, it also includes the broader ecosystem of “**other housing**” programs, interventions, and supports (e.g., treatment options, landlord recruitment, home-sharing, financial assistance).

Using STEP

To evaluate the Sonoma Valley homeless service system, including how it stacks up to the STEP framework, this Plan built on the research and findings from a 2022 homelessness strategic assessment report also conducted by Andrew Hening Consulting, LLC. The discovery process for that report included interviewing 19 local, regional, and countywide stakeholders, touring anchor service providers, including SOS, FISH, and La Luz, meeting with the Police and Fire Departments, which included touring local “hot spots,” interviewing people with lived experience of homelessness, and reviewing past reports, assessments, and parallel planning efforts.

Since the original report, Mr. Hening has continued to work with our local system of care, particularly around building out the “by-name-list” process and trying to bring more funding to our community. Those efforts have further informed this analysis.



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Strengths of the Current System

- There has been an incredibly strong in-kind and volunteer response to homelessness, with some organizations not even having paid staff.
- These types of in-kind services, such as SOS's food program, are critically important to offsetting costs for low-income residents, thus preventing new homelessness.
- Though not really proactively marketed, community members seem generally well-informed about prevention and crisis services, such as FISH's rental assistance program.
- Passionate local leaders are successfully raising significant new funding to put towards new services and programs.
- Local providers have a scrappy and tenacious track record of finding creative housing opportunities, even outside of the typical County safety net.
- Both the City and the County are at the table, trying to find ways to work together on a challenge that spans any one jurisdiction.

Weaknesses of the Current System

- The Valley is geographically removed from major service hubs in Santa Rosa and Petaluma, and transit is a major barrier to accessing services in these other regions (including Marin County in some cases).
- Even locally in the Sonoma Valley itself, there are logistical challenges seeking different services in multiple locations (while mostly on foot).
- People with lived experience of homelessness have cited the lack of “transformational” services (e.g., benefits advocacy, employment) or directly assigned case managers helping them to advocate and navigate through the system.
- There are seemingly bifurcated entry points for white and Latino households.

- Housing First is a specific program design / philosophy, which does not seem well integrated, embraced, or understood in the Valley.
- Local agencies currently lack the professionalized, full-time staff needed to address the complex physical and behavioral health needs of people experiencing long-term chronic homelessness.
- There are unique fears and concerns for women who are experiencing homelessness, especially around safety.
- There is a lack of a clear vision or strategy to mobilize the community around a shared goal.

Reasons for Hope

- SOS's new location at the Grange has allowed them to serve even more clients, which is an encouraging sign for where the most need is.
- Private and philanthropic funding in the Valley creates much more flexibility and opportunity for innovation.
- HAS has secured site control for land that could provide more housing, shelter, and/or collaborative service provision.
- County leadership is open to partnership and is actively supporting innovation, including with funding.
- There is an emerging case conferencing structure and process to create more coordination and partnership across agencies.
- There is increasing integration between the Sonoma Valley system of care and broader countywide systems like Coordinated Entry and HMIS.

Potential Threats to Progress

- People want to be served and housed in their current community – local solutions need to be part of the mix.
- If left unresolved, structural issues will push more people into homelessness.

- Regional providers are struggling to find and retain quality staff, which jeopardizes the ability to develop long-term, therapeutic care relationships.
- The lack of a clear vision / plan / taskforce is preventing alignment and more substantial investment.
- The lack of a collaborative structure has been exacerbated by historical managerial / elected turnover at the City, as well as potential future changes to leadership among service providers.
- The longer people go unserved, the harder it becomes to help them later.
- People become skeptical of the system when it overpromises / does not deliver results.
- Programs that are overly rules / behavior-based can push people out.
- There isn't clear responsibility or accountability for who helps the people who fall through the cracks.
- The County's Coordinated Entry System is often the pathway to supportive housing placements, but it can be an onerous and long process.

Overall Findings

- **Finding #1:** Given regional, state, and national best practices for addressing homelessness, the local system of care could be more effectively configured.
- **Finding #2:** The most immediate problem, as is the case in many communities, is insufficiently supporting people experiencing long-term chronic homelessness.
- **Finding #3:** Any future progress will be dependent on creating a strong foundational structure for collaboration.

Part IV. Our Strategy

A strategy is “a careful plan or method for achieving a particular goal, usually over a long period of time.” An effective strategic planning process helps a community to articulate a goal, build alignment across all involved, and craft a plan that will guarantee the achievement of the goal.

Our Goal

Our goal is to reach “Functional Zero” homelessness in the Sonoma Valley by June 30, 2026. Functional Zero is the idea that even though a homeless system of care might not be able to fully reform the upstream issues causing homelessness, it *can* house every person experiencing long-term homelessness (more than 90 days) and ensure homelessness is rare, brief, and one-time for anyone who becomes homeless thereafter (less than 90 days).

Our Strategy

To achieve this goal, our strategy is to create a highly coordinated, housing-focused system of care that can sustain placement momentum over time. Looking at this strategy a bit more closely:

- **A coordinated team ...**
 - Ensures every provider is at the table
 - Clearly delineates roles and responsibilities
 - Eliminates duplication of services and efforts
 - Aligns with countywide efforts and service models
 - Operates with a culture of being “one agency”

- **A housing-focused system of care ...**
 - Uses a By-Name-List to identify people experiencing homelessness
 - Develops housing action plans for every person on the BNL
 - Commits to consistent action towards these plans
 - Pursues housing acquisition strategies that suit the local market
 - Maintains a focus on prevention and “problem-solving” (i.e., doing whatever it takes to get people back inside as quickly as possible)

- **A sustainable and enduring approach ...**
 - Secures ongoing, multi-year financial commitments
 - Supports organizational capacity-building
 - Partners with other safety net providers for wraparound care
 - As needed, recruits new service provider partners to fill gaps

Part V. Our Implementation Plan

Strategic success is doing the right things.
Tactical success is then doing the right things well.

Focus Areas

In order to build a coordinated, housing-focused system of care that can sustain housing placement momentum over the next three years, we should focus our efforts on the following implementation areas:

- A coordinated team ...
 - **Focus Area #1 – Coordinated Outreach.** In line with the Sonoma County Continuum of Care’s Strategic Plan, support the implementation of a “sub-regionalized” outreach system.
 - **Focus Area #2 – Centralized Services.** Build out a more focused service corridor along Highway 12 for people experiencing homelessness.
 - **Focus Area #3 – Root Causes.** Coordinate with broader community efforts to address the upstream causes of homelessness (e.g., food insecurity, affordable housing development, mental health, healthcare).
- A housing-focused system of care ...
 - **Focus Area #4 – More Local Housing.** In line with the Sonoma County Continuum of Care’s Strategic Plan, expand access to both affordable and supportive housing.
 - **Focus Area #5 – Non-Congregate Shelter.** In line with the Sonoma County Continuum of Care’s Strategic Plan, increase non-congregate shelter capacity.
- A sustainable and enduring approach ...
 - **Focus Area #6 – Organizational Capacity.** Increase and improve the organizational and financial capacity of local service providers.

Timing

From a change management perspective, it will be important to pace our investments and policy interventions. As such, each year of our three-year plan will embody a different theme or purpose:

- **Year 1**
 - Fund and launch our most pressing investments
 - Focus on the most urgent policy and program changes
 - Develop a framework to measure our baseline

- **Year 2**
 - Provide time and space for new investments to blossom
 - Continue to refine and optimize new approaches
 - Do more of what's working and less of what isn't

- **Year 3**
 - Evaluate new system against baseline
 - Revisit focus areas and pivot as needed
 - Begin planning for the next three-year action cycle

The following pages provide a detailed implementation roadmap based on this change management arc. Specific timing can be read as follows:

Not Yet Started	
Started / In Progress	X
Completed	

A Coordinated Team

A coordinated team ensures every provider is at the table, clearly delineates roles and responsibilities, eliminates duplication of efforts, aligns with countywide efforts and service models, and operates with a culture of being “one agency.”

FOCUS AREA #1 - In line with the Sonoma County Continuum of Care’s Strategic Plan, support the implementation of a “sub-regionalized” outreach system.

Workstreams	Owner	Year 1 FY23-24	Year 2 FY24-25	Year 3 FY25-26
Fund and recruit for a “Homeless and Housing Coordinator” position or function to help facilitate and drive local efforts.	City, County	X		
Participate in countywide sub-regionalization and resource sharing discussions, such as Coordinated Entry placement meetings and the Built for Zero improvement team.	Coordinator	X	X	X
Fund and recruit three “Outreach Case Managers” to provide sufficient caseload-based services for all persons experiencing literal homelessness. At least one position will be fluent in Spanish.	Homeless Action Sonoma (HAS)	X	X	
Convene and collaborate through weekly or bi-weekly By-Name-List (BNL) case conferencing meetings.	All Providers	X	X	X

FOCUS AREA #2 - Build out a more focused service corridor along Highway 12 for people experiencing homelessness.

Workstreams	Owner	Year 1 FY23-24	Year 2 FY24-25	Year 3 FY25-26
Launch expanded homeless meal program access in the Springs.	Sonoma Overnight Support (SOS)	X		
Shift laundry and shower day services to new program locations along Highway 12 and work to provide evening and weekend access.	HAS, SOS	X	X	
Launch a central site for providing transformational social safety net services (e.g., workforce development, benefits advocacy, legal services, immigration services).	County, Catalyst		X	X

FOCUS AREA #3 – Coordinate with broader community efforts to address upstream causes of homelessness (e.g., food insecurity, affordable housing development, mental health, healthcare) but remain laser-focused on housing placements.

Workstreams	Owner	Year 1 FY23-24	Year 2 FY24-25	Year 3 FY25-26
Provide emergency financial assistance and resource navigation for households at imminent risk of homelessness.	FISH	X	X	X
In addition to case conferencing, structure weekly or bi-weekly BNL Meetings such that there is a regular time for “system” discussions, including with the partners described below.	Coordinator	X	X	X
Buildout a more robust partnership with the Hanna Center to utilize the new behavioral health drop-in center to support therapy, group meetings, and medication for clients.	HAS, Hanna Center	X	X	X
Work with local food service partners, including Redwood Food Empire, Food for All, and Meals on Wheels, to implement the recommendations from the Catalyst food insecurity report.	SOS, Food Partners	X	X	X
Avoid the criminalization of homelessness and work with local law enforcement officials to connect criminal justice-engaged people with social services.	Sheriff's Office, Sonoma PD	X	X	X
Partner with affordable housing advocacy groups to advance local housing solutions, including vetting the possibility for expanded renter protection policies.	TBD Partners	X	X	X
In line with Focus Area #2, ensure local residents have access to transformational countywide resources (e.g., workforce development, benefits advocacy, legal services, immigration services).	County		X	X
Stop the revolving door of emergency healthcare utilization and buildout capacity for medical respite.	Sonoma Valley Hospital, Sonoma Valley Health Center		X	X

Homelessness vs. the Broader Social Safety Net

While homeless services are no doubt part of the broader social safety net, which ranges from workforce development to financial assistance to healthcare, **in the most effective homeless systems of care, homeless service providers help educate and advocate for these broader issues while remaining laser-focused on the specific goal of rehousing people as rapidly as possible.**

A Housing-Focused System

A housing-focused system uses a By-Name-List (BNL) to identify people experiencing literal homelessness, develops housing action plans for every person on the BNL, commits to consistent action towards these plans, pursues housing acquisition strategies appropriate for the local market, and maintains a focus on prevention and “problem-solving” (i.e., doing whatever it takes to get people back inside as quickly as possible)

FOCUS AREA #4 - In line with the Sonoma County Continuum of Care’s Strategic Plan, dramatically expand access to both affordable and supportive housing opportunities.

Workstreams	Owner	Year 1 FY23-24	Year 2 FY24-25	Year 3 FY25-26
Provide support and training to local case managers to improve housing navigation capabilities (e.g., enrolling people in the County’s Coordinated Entry System, signing clients up for housing waitlists).	Coordinator, County	X	X	X
Recruit local landlords to provide rental opportunities to clients, including accepting rental assistance subsidies.	Coordinator, TBD Provider	X	X	X
Pilot and scale a scattered site supportive housing program (i.e., a program similar to COTS’ “Integrity House” program or SHARE Sonoma).	TBD Provider	X	X	X
Work with local property owners to create shared housing or living arrangements (e.g., home sharing, creating ADUs).	TBD Provider	X	X	X
Better align homeless housing efforts and needs with broader zoning and land use discussions.	Coordinator	X	X	X
Develop capital and operational funding strategy for the permanent redevelopment of HAS’s Home and Safe Village program.	HAS, City, County, Catalyst	X	X	X
Better utilize County, State, and Federal funding sources to finance local homeless housing efforts.	Coordinator		X	X
Acquire, rehab, and convert existing single family, multi-family, and commercial properties.	Coordinator, City, County, Philanthropy		X	X

FOCUS AREA #5 - In line with the Sonoma County Continuum of Care’s Strategic Plan, provide non-congregate shelter capacity for at least 50% of people experiencing homelessness in the Sonoma Valley.

Workstreams	Owner	Year 1 FY23-24	Year 2 FY24-25	Year 3 FY25-26
Open HAS’s Home and Safe Village program.	HAS	X		
Pilot and refine a process for using the BNL to make referrals to local emergency shelter programs.	HAS, SOS, Coordinator	X		
In line with Focus Area #3, continue to seek relocation and potential expansion of low-barrier, local safe parking along Highway 12.	SOS, City, County, Catalyst		X	X
Incorporate medical respite and other healthcare intensive beds into the local shelter system.	Sonoma Valley Hospital, Sonoma Valley Health Center		X	X
Launch a “permanent” location for flex-up inclement weather shelter (e.g., warming, cooling, air quality, fires).	City, County, All Providers		X	

Throughput

Beyond ensuring basic dignity, emergency shelter capacity directly correlates with community impacts from homelessness. For example, the lack of shelter is a major factor behind the encampments and other humanitarian crises that have become a hallmark of homelessness on the West Coast. Importantly, however, if shelter programs are not thoughtfully designed and appropriately managed, they can become yet another barrier to regaining housing. In many communities, people are simply warehoused in these facilities and given an arbitrary time limit to “figure it out.” There will always be some people who thrive in this environment, but for people with more complex challenges, particularly people experiencing chronic homelessness, these settings very rarely lead to retention, let alone permanent housing placements.

When it comes to creating any shelter program, it is critical to remain “housing focused.” Shelter should be a means to an end, not an end in itself, and to ensure that this is the case, shelter programs should be structured around the following outcomes:

Percentage of clients exiting to permanent housing
(should be as high as possible)

The average length of stay prior to a successful housing placement
(should be as low as possible)

A Sustainable and Enduring Approach

A sustainable and enduring approach means securing ongoing, multi-year financial commitments, supporting organizational capacity building (e.g., developing policy and procedures, assisting with recruitment efforts), partnering with other safety net providers for wraparound care, and as needed, bringing in new service provider partners to fill gaps.

FOCUS AREA #6 - Increase and improve the organizational and financial capacity of local homeless service providers.

Workstreams	Owner	Year 1 FY23-24	Year 2 FY24-25	Year 3 FY25-26
Develop an employment pipeline that utilizes people with lived experience of homelessness, particularly for frontline work (shelter workers, food service).	HAS, SOS	X	X	X
Develop and Implement a clearer shared service and investment strategy among local funders and policymakers.	City, County, healthcare, philanthropy	X		
In line with the CoC Strategic Plan, establish and implement minimum compensation and benefit standards to support local hiring and retention.	All Providers	X		
Strengthen technological capacity and coordination within and across organizations.	County, Coordinator	X	X	X
Utilize a data dashboard tracking system -level performance to monitor progress.	Coordinator	X	X	X

One Year from Now

At times strategic planning can feel abstract and overly conceptual. Consequently, from a change management perspective, it is important to create a visceral, tangible sense of the system we're trying to create. When we do that, it's clear that a significant amount of progress is possible in a relatively short period of time. For example, based on our strategy and focus areas, by June 30, 2024:

- There will be a “Homeless and Housing Coordinator” position (or function) serving the entire Sonoma Valley. This work will be funded for three years, with equal contributions from the City and the County. Thanks to added capacity from the Coordinator, our team will be fully participating with the countywide Coordinated Entry System and convening weekly By-Name-List (BNL) case conferencing meetings. The Coordinator will also be regularly including social service partners for systemic discussions and proactively driving affordable and homeless housing opportunities throughout the Valley.
- A new housing provider will be operating in the Valley, providing market appropriate solutions for people experiencing homelessness. In addition to recruiting landlords to accept various housing subsidies, such as housing vouchers, this provider will have launched a handful of master-leased or purchased homes, which will have resulted in housing approximately 20 people who had been on the BNL.
- Homeless Action Sonoma’s (HAS) Home and Safe Village will have one year of operational experience under its belt. It is now serving its second cohort of residents, with the first cohort having successfully transitioned through to housing placements through Coordinated Entry and the scattered site housing program described above.
- Our system will be fully staffed up. We will have at least three full-time “Outreach Case Managers,” one of whom is bilingual. Each of these Outreach Case Managers will have an assigned caseload of approximately 20-25 people, and the Case Managers will be proactively moving their clients through designated engagement buckets towards permanent housing.
- In terms of day services for people who are either sheltered or unsheltered, there will be a clearer corridor of care along Highway 12. Sonoma Overnight

Support (SOS) will be operating an expanded food service program in the Springs, FISH will continue to provide emergency financial assistance at its current location, HAS will be providing shelter and drop-in services at its new Village location, and plans will be in motion to launch a County social service hub nearby.

- Based on our community dashboard, which will be based on data from the BNL, we will know we have reduced the number of people experiencing literal homelessness by at least 25%.
- Finally, there will be a real sense and feeling that we're operating as "one agency." Each provider will have found their niche(s), funders will be aligned and making sufficient investments to support the system overall, and in many ways, Sonoma Valley will have become a model for other communities.

Shifting and Growing Resources

In addition to having a workplan that all partners are committed to implementing, one of the most powerful ways to drive systemic change is to realign funding and amend scopes of work to reflect new programmatic priorities. Based on our strategy and focus areas, we can project out what it will likely cost to build our desired system of care and then make a plan for shifting and increasing resources to meet the need.

If we fully operationalized everything proposed in this Action Plan, our system is likely to cost approximately \$3.6M a year (not adjusting for inflation). If current levels of private and philanthropic funding continue as they have, our system could expect to bring in approximately \$1.7M a year. That leaves a gap of \$1.9M.

While a gap of \$1.9M is substantial, it is also achievable. Increased and sustained investments from the City and County could potentially generate another \$1M per year, bringing the gap down to \$900k. For this remaining amount, local providers could more effectively leverage State and Federal grant and funding opportunities (e.g., CDBG, the annual CoC NOFA, CalAIM), other local stakeholders such as the healthcare system could get involved, especially for medical-related services like respite beds, and all of this momentum could spur even more private and philanthropic support.

POTENTIAL Annualized Action Plan Budget

Service / Investment				POTENTIAL Future Revenue					
STEP	Program or Position	Provider	Cost	City	County	State / Fed	Private	Other	Gap
Triage	Emergency Assistance	FISH	\$500,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$500,000	\$0	\$0
Engagement	BNL Coordinator	TBD	\$120,000	\$60,000	\$60,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Engagement	Outreach Case Managers	HAS	\$300,000	\$100,000	\$200,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Engagement	Food	SOS	\$800,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$800,000	\$0	\$0
Engagement	Day Services - Showers and Laundry	SOS / HAS	\$150,000	\$100,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$50,000
Engagement	Safe Parking	SOS	\$180,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$180,000
Engagement	Home and Safe Village	HAS	\$900,000	\$0	\$500,000	\$0	\$400,000	\$0	\$0
Engagement	"As Needed" Inclement Weather Shelter	TBD	\$135,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$135,000
Placement	Master Leased Supportive Housing	TBD	\$500,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$200,000	\$300,000
			\$3,585,000	\$260,000	\$760,000	\$0	\$1,700,000	\$200,000	\$665,000

Measuring Our Progress

Finally, we come to the million-dollar question. How will we know if our Action Plan is working? The following four questions will help us remain focused on our overarching vision of achieving functional zero homelessness in Sonoma Valley by June 30, 2026:

1. **How many people are experiencing long-term chronic homelessness in Sonoma Valley?**
2. **What percentage of that group is sheltered?**
3. **How many people exited homelessness over the last quarter? How?**
 - Not seen in 90 days
 - Housed (details on type of housing placement)
 - Substance use treatment program
 - Relocated to a different area
 - Incarcerated
 - Deceased
4. **What type of engagement is happening to support people who are still homeless?**
 - **Identified** – Client is known by community providers.
 - **Initial engagement** – Outreach workers and case managers are beginning to build a relationship.
 - **Fully assessed** – Client has all necessary documents to become eligible for Coordinated Entry housing referrals.
 - **Housing referral / resource** – Client has received a housing resource through Coordinated Entry and is searching for housing.

- **Recently housed** – Client was recently permanently housed, and a warm handoff is in motion to the long-term housing provider and / or case manager.

Success would then look like:

- The overall number of people on the BNL is coming down.
- An increasingly higher percentage of people are in shelter.
- The rate of quarterly exits is increasing, particularly to housing or treatment.
- All people on the list being fully assessed for Coordinated Entry.

By the time we reach

Appendix

Glossary

By Name List / BNL - A way to focus on housing the most vulnerable (and often most service-demanding) first by looking at individual needs and histories

Case Conferencing - Where service providers strategize about individuals and how to best address their service needs.

Case Management - A social worker helping a person to address their needs.

Chronically Homeless - A federal designation for a person experiencing long-term homelessness with a disabling condition.

Coordinated Entry System - A housing placement system required to receive Federal and State funding that coordinates care and reduces barriers to access

Continuum of Care - The governing body that determines federal funding allocations and develops regional policies for addressing homelessness.

Homeless Management Information System / HMIS - A countywide system to collect data about people experiencing homelessness.

Housing First - Putting someone into housing first and then supporting their recovery from homelessness,

Lived Experience - Persons who have been or are currently homeless who serve as representatives for the unhoused.

Sub-regionalization - A strategy in Sonoma County to form by-name-lists (BNL) in smaller subregions throughout the county, facilitate case conferencing around these BNLs, coordinate with the countywide Coordinated Entry System, and ultimately driving housing placements.

Vouchers - Subsidized housing whereby vouchers holders pay 30% of their income to housing costs.

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