

## Retooling the Homeless Crisis Response System

### *The Homeless Emergency*

*Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, passed in 2009, is the most important piece of federal legislation on homelessness in 20 years. HEARTH affects how homeless services are funded and delivered, including consolidating funding programs, increasing local flexibility, and introducing new community-level performance expectations.*

*This brief, **Retooling the Homeless Crisis Response System**, describes the paradigm shift embedded in both the HEARTH Act and **Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness**, which call for local communities to create coordinated, crisis resolution systems. It describes the essential role of philanthropy in helping communities to make that shift and provides examples of strategic investments and recommended actions for grantmakers to support this transition.*

### Opening Doors: A new national vision set in motion

Among its many elements, the HEARTH Act directed the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) to develop the first-ever national plan to end homelessness.<sup>1</sup> In June 2010, USICH published *Opening Doors*. It establishes ambitious national goals for addressing homelessness, including:

- Finishing the job of ending chronic homelessness by 2015
- Preventing and ending homelessness among veterans by 2015
- Preventing and ending homelessness for families, youth, and children by 2020
- Setting a path to ending all types of homelessness

To do these things, the Plan calls for action at federal, state, and local levels, both within and outside of the traditional homeless system. It promotes increased federal and community leadership to address the problem of homelessness. And it specifically recognizes three critical areas for increased federal investment and coordination outside of traditional homeless services: affordable housing, economic security, and health care.

The final objective of the *Opening Doors* Plan, and the one that most directly addresses the efforts of local providers and funders, is to “Retool the Homeless Crisis Response System.” The plan calls for communities to:

*“Transform homeless services to crisis response systems that prevent homelessness and rapidly return people who experience homelessness to stable housing.”*

This phrase, and the recommendations that follow, highlight the importance of assuring that all stakeholders in a community work together to help homeless people regain housing quickly and permanently. In other words, it highlights the importance of developing a systemic approach. Philanthropic organizations can play a key role in this transformation, and many are already partnering in their states and cities to bring about change.

### Where we have been

Modern homeless programs generally grew up piecemeal. Often agencies and foundations worked together to respond to specific and growing needs in a community. Programs were launched and facilities built, but they typically operated in isolation from one another, with rules or other limitations that sometimes left certain homeless populations unserved or underserved. The emphasis was on providing critical help to the individuals who entered the programs, but not on addressing the community-wide problem in a coordinated fashion.

Beginning in the mid-1990's, HUD required communities to develop "Continuums of Care" (CoC) for planning purposes, which included local planning bodies to coordinate applications for federal funds. While the CoC model organized stakeholders to plan for new grants, existing programs remained largely separate from one another. With the exception of a few communities, today homeless services are still largely delivered through loosely related programs and agencies, not organized as a system with a common set of goals and practices. To make significant strides on the goals of Opening Doors will take communities putting their resources to work jointly to address and end the problem. New regulations to implement the HEARTH Act emphasize the increased role of the Continuum of Care in coordinating and evaluating that local system.

## What is a housing crisis response system?

A **housing crisis response system** is a network of programs and resources working together to address the problem of homelessness at the community level. It uses its combined resources to provide a range of appropriate responses for all the people in the community who experience homelessness or face an imminent housing loss. Such a system has:

- a) A single or coordinated points of entry into services that are well-understood in the community;
- b) criteria for assessing need, offering assistance, targeting resources, and prioritizing help;
- c) clear roles and goals for each provider and program within the system;
- d) an emphasis on assisting as many people as possible to resolve their immediate housing crisis as quickly as possible, and
- e) a range of response levels, from prevention support or one-time assistance to short-term facilities with rehousing supports, and permanent supportive housing for those with the greatest barriers to housing stability.

A crisis response system considers all the competing crisis needs and the sum of resources available to meet them, and saves its most expensive resources for those who cannot be successfully assisted without them. The systems resources are focused on ending the housing crisis for each person served, which may mean that some services previously provided by homeless programs to address long-term well-being are either transferred to other systems of care, or are delivered in a different way in the community to households who need them, once they have regained housing.

Communities that have moved to more coordinated response systems have seen the benefits of this change in decreases in homelessness and increases in housing outcomes. But the change is not easy, and the path is only now being explored in most of the country.

## The Role of Philanthropy

Funders can play a critical role in helping communities develop their systems. A homeless crisis response system is the best way to ensure that all of the community's resources to address homelessness are coordinated and directed toward solving the problem. Philanthropists want to strengthen their grantees' ability to effectively meet local needs and to better invest their limited resources. Local grantmakers can't provide the amount of resources that governments can invest, but they can be influential in making catalytic investments and in setting the direction for these efforts. Supporting local efforts to develop a more systematic and accountable approach to ending homelessness aligns well with the goals of most grantmaking and philanthropic organizations.

### Examples of leadership and investments

In many communities, philanthropy has funded and participated in the leadership of planning activities that are essential for designing the response and for making change. Recent examples include:

**Funder:** Melville Charitable Trust

**Goal:** Align efforts to end homelessness in Connecticut with HEARTH and Opening Doors for improved system coordination and outcomes.

*Opening Doors* and the HEARTH Act provide a vision of a new, more coordinated way for communities to organize the response to homelessness. In Connecticut, providers, funders, and advocates have committed to realigning their statewide efforts to match the new framework of rapid response and permanent solutions. This comprehensive effort called *Opening Doors -Connecticut* focuses on retooling many aspects of the homeless system and updates the statewide *Reaching Home* campaign to reflect the new vision. The Melville Charitable Trust has provided grants to four highly respected leadership agencies to spearhead planning and restructuring: Partnership for Strong Communities, the Coalition to End Homelessness, the Connecticut Housing Coalition, and the local office of the Corporation for Supportive Housing. Each organization provides expertise to state-wide working groups of stakeholders focused on a range of critical issues, including using local data, expanding rapid rehousing and prevention,

increasing affordable and supportive housing, and linking health care and housing. The Trust's support for Opening Doors – Connecticut brings all the key stakeholders and funders together around developing the new vision and leverages the investment of all the public and private partners currently engaged in ending homelessness to improve outcomes and increase coordination.

[www.melvilletrust.org](http://www.melvilletrust.org)

**Funder:** The Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation

**Goal:** Redesign the family homeless response and flow of resources to a more housing-centric model that houses more families faster.

For the past decade, the Fireman Foundation has been a key partner with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in efforts to retool the State's family homeless system and move toward a more "housing-centric" model. Fireman initially invested in an analysis of the system that demonstrated that one-fifth of families served used nearly half the systems resources, while other families—with some of the greatest needs—were underserved. Many families still linger in motels and shelter for long periods before gaining housing.

Advocacy and investments by the Fireman Foundation helped establish the state Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness and local leadership councils to focus on the issue and implement new designs. The Foundation also participated in a legislative Homeless Commission that made recommendations for change and provided \$10 million for demonstrations across the state. The Foundation underwrote the evaluation of the demonstration programs and supported learning labs, local workshops, and trainings on national best practices. The Foundation's continuing partnership with the State, and its targeted investments, are intended to ultimately eliminate the need to house homeless families in motels, and to shorten family shelter stays through the addition of diversion, prevention, and rapid rehousing resources.

[www.ppffound.org](http://www.ppffound.org)

Not all investments that support change have to be so comprehensive or sustained. Smaller foundations and philanthropic funders are also supporting important local redesign efforts. For example, in 2012 the Sacramento Region Community Foundation, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange County, underwrote bringing HEARTH-focused Performance Improvement Clinics to their communities. Many United Ways across the country lend support not only to programs that address homelessness but also invest in and help lead planning and change efforts.

## What You Can Do

- **Support learning opportunities for providers, other funders, and stakeholders.** These can include support for local system-planning processes; help for providers to attend trainings, conferences and retreats; and creating opportunities to learn about what other communities have done first-hand through site visits and webinar exchanges.
- **Participate actively in the local planning/transition process.** Foundations are often seen as more neutral and less conflicted than other stakeholders. As such they can be tremendously influential in helping providers and other funders to move from what they currently know and do to new ways of working together. The voice of philanthropy at the planning table is extremely important.
- **Make funding commitments to agencies that participate in the local system process.** Foundations can encourage or require applicants for funding to demonstrate their commitment to a housing-focused, crisis response vision of services, including participation in the planning process and commitments to tracking outcomes as part of the greater system.

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## To Learn More

For more information on the Opening Doors Plan: [www.usich.gov](http://www.usich.gov)

For more information about best practices and system organization: [www.endhomelessness.org](http://www.endhomelessness.org)

For more information about the role of philanthropy in ending homelessness: [www.funderstogether.org](http://www.funderstogether.org)

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness is an independent agency within the federal executive branch and is composed of the heads of 19 departments and agencies. Its mission is to coordinate the federal response to homelessness and to create a national partnership to reduce and end homelessness in the nation. For more information see [www.usich.gov](http://www.usich.gov).