

COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Making Smart Investments in a Time of Crisis

Communities across America must quickly plan for the multiple funding decisions coming at lightning speed and adjust from immediate crisis response to a more purposeful set of actions that will reduce homelessness. The 2008 crisis offers salient lessons – some communities quickly spent down the one-time resources absent targeting or investment strategy, while others used the opportunity to transform their community's response to homelessness.

The following are critical elements to consider as you bring together the full range of partners and resources required to respond to this historic crisis.

Promote Integrated Planning

CoC, ESG, CDBG, and FEMA funding opportunities bring together non-traditional partners, complementary skills sets, and an opportunity to infuse significant resources into local prevention and rehousing systems. By working together to align resources and use each source for its most strategic purpose, the funds will go further in meeting local needs and leveraging long-term system transformation. The CARES Act provides an opportunity now to align actions and funding to further the efforts of ending homelessness in your community.

Lead with Equity

Homeless system planning typically reinforces existing community norms. In this moment, communities have an opportunity to ensure representation and to center equity in system design and decision-making. Leaders have a key opportunity to change the way “usual” business is done, and elevate the voice and expertise of those directly impacted by decisions. Reaching out right now will ensure short-term decisions don’t inadvertently perpetuate bias and institutional discrimination and will lay the groundwork for deeper planning in partnership with underrepresented constituencies.

Short-term Investments Have Long-term Consequences

Hotels and other non-congregate shelter options are essential to preventing virus spread, however, these settings can quickly eat up resources that could be redeployed to more permanent housing solutions. Communities must move as quickly to re-house as they did to fix the short-term problem. Rehousing strategies should be grounded in examining inflow and creating clear pathways to permanent housing – from problem-solving to one-time rehousing support to rapid re-housing to shallow rental assistance to permanent subsidies and permanent supportive housing.

Look Outside the Homeless System for Prevention Resources

We don’t yet know the pace at which individuals and families will move from job interruptions to facing literal homelessness. The scale of the economic crisis is far too great to mitigate with homeless resources alone. If we move too quickly to respond using our limited ESG funds for prevention, we will likely not meet the need (e.g. one state’s eviction prevention fund was depleted in 16 minutes) and may lose the opportunity to make strategic investments that will have a bigger long-term impact. Work with your state and local partners to understand the full-range of resources that can be leveraged for the disaster response – from CDBG, the Paycheck Protection Act, enhanced unemployment, and private philanthropy.

Create Clear Pathways to Permanent Housing Options

A rehousing effort at scale needs clearly outlined pathways to subsidized and non-subsidized housing options in order to avoid discharges to homeless shelters or streets from isolation or non-congregate shelter. Start planning and mapping the pathways out of new and existing shelters now to help your community and funders align and direct their current and CARES Act funding to create flow through and into housing for your system. If your system has not yet scaled diversion as an intervention, now is an important time to build that infrastructure and model.

This Is a Moment to Do Innovative Things

Crisis can provide an opportunity to do things that could not be done before. In communities this may include adding new interventions or assets to your system. For example, the CARES Act and local resources could be used to stand up diversion at scale for your homelessness system. It may also include creating new permanent housing assets with buildings you acquire or use for non-congregate shelter during the crisis. Conversion of motels into new permanent affordable or supportive housing units could be possible with an allocation of money from CARES or local dollars for rehabilitation.

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