

Pierce County Coordinated Entry System One Year Evaluation Report Executive Summary

Prepared for Pierce County
Human Services
by Focus Strategies

March 2019



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I. Background and Purpose

In 2016, Pierce County Human Services (PC) implemented their local Coordinated Entry System (CES), designed to quickly and effectively connect all people experiencing a housing crisis to a housing solution. The CES, which replaced the previous Centralized Intake system, works to prioritize the highest-needs households and provide fair, equitable access to homeless system resources. Like communities across the country, PC adopted CES with the goal of streamlining and coordinating access to limited homeless system resources.

Focus Strategies has conducted a one-year evaluation of the CES which covers the period from April 1, 2017 through March 31, 2018 and provides a follow-up to our evaluation of the first six months of CES operations from October 2016 through March 31, 2017. The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of CES and determine whether progress has been made since the original six-month assessment. Results from this evaluation will inform PC's ongoing refinement of the CES, building upon PC's overarching goals for Coordinated Entry including: (1) providing a clear, well-understood pathway to accessing the local homeless crisis response system; (2) helping households resolve their housing crisis and avoid re-entering the system whenever possible; (3) resources are distributed appropriately and in a timely manner, prioritizing those households with the highest needs for the most intensive assistance; and (4) people who experience homelessness are helped move rapidly into permanent housing and do not return to homelessness.

Our previous evaluation found that, as a general matter, CES was achieving its intended objectives, however we also identified several areas where the system could be refined to yield stronger results. This follow-up evaluation identifies continuing improvement and some significant system strengths.

II. Key Objectives of the CES Evaluation

The overarching goals and objectives of this one-year evaluation of Pierce County's CES include (1) assessing whether CES implementation is achieving the goals established by PC for CES; (2) determining whether improvements have been made in CES performance since the previous six-month evaluation; (3) understanding stakeholders' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the new system, and (4) analyzing how those perceptions align with available data. Our evaluation also considered key questions such as whether CES is effectively helping clients resolve their housing crises and avoid re-entry to homelessness; how client flow is working; whether CES has successfully prioritized and increased access to assistance for higher-barrier households; how effectively diversion and housing problem-solving conversations are working; and how effectively and timely referrals to housing interventions are.

III. Methodology

To evaluate the CES, Focus Strategies gathered and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was primarily gathered during in-person focus groups held with key CES stakeholders, including representatives from the Pierce County Human Services; CES partner agencies Associated Ministries,

Catholic Community Services, and the PATH outreach team; housing and shelter provider agencies; and clients of CES in Spring 2018. The overarching goal of the focus groups was to better understand Pierce County's current CES implementation and identify potential areas for refinement to ensure CES is achieving its intended goals. Quantitative data analyzed for the evaluation primarily came from the community's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) via Pierce County staff and included data related to screening, housing solutions conversations, enrollment in diversion and the priority pool, and referrals to system resources.

IV. Findings

The following are key themes presented during our analyses of both qualitative and quantitative data related to the performance of CES during the one-year period.

Overall Processes: Generally, most perceive the existing CES system to be functioning well thanks to client-focused, streamlined, and *transparent* processes. Many attributed this to increased data sharing via HMIS, allowing for greater consistency and client coordination throughout the CES process.

Screening: As an initial step in the coordinated entry process, people seeking assistance are screened via the CES screening phone line, by a mobile outreach worker, or another front-line staff person to ensure they are literally homeless and thus eligible for assistance. Those who are identified as literally homeless at the screening step are scheduled for a Housing Solutions Conversations (HSC) appointment, described below. Feedback from both providers and clients of CES noted challenges related to the phone line used to screen people seeking assistance, consistently reporting phone lines are too limited in comparison to the demand and availability of people seeking assistance. Additionally, many clients never participate in this step if they are accessing CES while already in shelter *or* unsheltered and in contact with outreach.

Nevertheless, our data analyses confirmed that the screening process is effective; more than 11,000 callers were screened and our data showed that just over 2,800 (25%) literally homeless households entered the system and were scheduled for an HSC. Analysis of demographic data associated with the screening process also showed that households headed by persons identifying as black and/or disabled were more likely to have an HSC following screening.

Housing Solutions Conversation/Diversion: Once households seeking assistance are determined to be literally homeless, they are engaged by an Associated Ministries or Catholic Community Services diversion specialist in a Housing Solutions Conversation, designed to talk through a household's current circumstances, resources, and social networks to help resolve their homelessness through problem-solving and limited financial assistance. If the household can identify a viable housing plan during the HSC, they will then be "enrolled in diversion" and may work with a CES specialist for up to 30 days to secure housing outside of the homeless crisis response system.

Overall, both qualitative and quantitative analyses point to the effectiveness and success of housing solutions conversations and the diversion process – resulting in more than half of households engaged in an HSC being enrolled in diversion and around half of those being successfully diverted. Further, households who are successfully diverted have a very low rate of return to homelessness. We also discovered that issues presented during the six-month evaluation regarding communicating transparently and clearly to clients around what it means to "enter diversion" have been improved.

Additionally, the County is working to "deputize" additional organizations to facilitate HSC with clients to expand the availability of and access to this resource, although we heard from stakeholders that the process could be improved, as learning to do HSC is cumbersome and not well defined.

Prioritization: Households who cannot identify a housing solution outside of the homeless crisis response system are assessed via the community's Prioritization Tool and placed into the priority pool, which is designed to minimize the amount of time a household needs to wait for a referral to a program and ensure the highest need households are prioritized for available housing assistance. The Prioritization Tool is comprised of questions designed to capture data on a household's housing barriers and level of vulnerability, as well as determine what programs a household is eligible to enter. Outputs of this tool are used to prioritize the highest-needs households (those with the highest barriers to housing and highest vulnerability) in the priority pool for a housing intervention. Both stakeholders who provided input and our analysis of priority scores of those who were referred to housing affirmed that CES's prioritization of households is working as intended by ensuring housing resources are reserved for the most vulnerable or highest need households. Such households are being appropriately identified and prioritized for these resources.

Priority Pool and Referrals: As noted above, the priority pool is designed to streamline the referral process for programs within the homeless system and ensure the highest need households are prioritized for available housing assistance. Although a household may be enrolled in the priority pool, CES staff encourage these households to continue searching for housing on their own, given the scarcity of housing resources. Common concerns about the priority pool expressed amongst stakeholders was related to referral denials and communication around referrals. All stakeholder types noted a lack of clarity around who is responsible for ensuring clients are document ready prior to referral; whether that be outreach workers, housing providers, or other providers. Additionally, non-same-day emergency shelter providers participating in CES said their programs were not receiving enough referrals through CES to fill all beds, resulting in "empty shelters." Further, our quantitative analysis shows the number of households that receive a housing referral are about as expected, and many of those who receive a referral either reject it or they are rejected by the provider.

Timeliness: Stakeholder perceptions about the timeliness of CES processes, including the time between initial screening and the HSC, as well the referral process, differed from the results of our data analyses. While stakeholders said the amount of time between calling the CES phone line and the date of a housing solutions conversation appointment varied between hours and weeks, our data analysis showed that the time from initial contact with CES and when they have a housing solutions conversation is swift, averaging 5 days. Moreover, many perceive the referral process as slow, however, referrals are made quickly for households who receive them, though many households enrolled in the Priority Pool never receive a referral.

V. Recommendations

Based on the findings of our evaluation, Focus Strategies has developed a set of recommendations for PC to further refine the local CES and achieve better outcomes for clients accessing the system.

Screening and Housing Solutions Conversations (HSC): Our analysis found that the number of people who went through the screening step of the CES process was more than 11,000. Even with this high volume, stakeholders throughout the system expressed frustration around the inflexible hours and inconsistency of the screening line. However, based on conversations with staff, we determined inconsistencies in phone line hours and availability could be an unintended consequence of contract expectations. At the same time, the community is actively deputizing additional organizations and individuals to conduct the HSC step. Given this context and the extreme effectiveness of HSC as an intervention, we recommend utilizing resources to continue expanding the availability of the HSC rather than focusing on expanding

hours for the phone screening process, particularly given that many people don't even go through this step.

Housing Solutions Conversations/Diversion: Although providers and client feedback suggest that the quantity of funding available to each client may be too low *and* differences in amount and uses of assistance dollars exist between AM and CCS, our data analysis suggest these factors have not impacted client outcomes. We recommend equalizing the amount available per household across the two agencies, as well as ensuring that allowable uses are consistent.

Referral to Housing Interventions: Our analysis shows the number of households who receive a housing referral is around as expected, while the median time from Priority Pool entry to referral is eight to ten days. Nevertheless, the proportion of clients entering the Priority Pool is higher than expected, making the chance of referral for most people very small, contributing to perceptions that the wait time to receive a referral is extremely drawn out. Both qualitative and quantitative data suggests a high rate of referrals are declined and some significant barriers and inefficiencies in the referral process appear to still exist since the previous evaluation. Focus Strategies recommends focusing on refining the documentation and referral process, including clarifying and centralizing who is responsible for helping clients secure needed paperwork. We also recommending working to ensure clear communication and common understanding between CES and provider staff around program eligibility criteria, while ensuring providers are imposing appropriate, non-restrictive criteria.

Non-Same-Day Shelter: As described above, non-same-day shelters have experienced unfilled beds due to inefficiencies in the referral process, including completing client documentation. We recommend PC works alongside non-same-day shelters to improve consistency and mutual understanding around CES policies and processes for filling these beds through CES.

CES Provider Consistency: Some significant differences exist in the length of time it takes for each of the two CES providers to complete steps in the CES process, which we recommend exploring to determine ways to boost each providers' efficiency. Our analyses also indicated some areas where productivity of CES staff could be improved, thus we recommend setting and monitoring on a 75% productivity standard as part of their regular contract monitoring.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, Focus Strategies' one-year evaluation of Pierce County's CES indicates that the system is achieving its intended objectives, including helping people avoid entering the homeless crisis response system whenever possible and successfully prioritizing households with the highest needs for assistance. Since our last evaluation of CES, the system has also seen improvements in providing clear, transparent access to assistance, as well as in ensuring resources are distributed appropriately and in a timely manner. Our evaluation identified some refinements that would further bolster the system's effectiveness and efficiency if implemented. Nevertheless, the CES is a critical, well-functioning, and highly-effective component of the community's broader homeless crisis response.