

Explainer

Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research

What is a Continuum of Care?

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A Continuum of Care (CoC) is a regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals. In 2006, there were 476 Continuums of Care.

In 1995, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) began to require communities to submit a single application for McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants in order to streamline the funding application process, encourage coordination of housing and service providers on a local level, and promote the development of Continuums of Care (CoCs). Since communities would be required to come together to submit a comprehensive application, the goal was that they would have a more structural and strategic approach to housing and providing services to homeless people.¹ A CoC would provide this more strategic system by providing homeless people with housing and services appropriate to their range of needs.²

According to HUD, a CoC is “a community plan to organize and deliver housing and services to meet the specific needs of people who are homeless as they move to stable housing and maximize self-sufficiency. It includes action steps to end homelessness and prevent a return to homelessness.”³ HUD identifies four necessary parts of a continuum:

- Outreach, intake, and assessment in order to identify service and housing needs and provide a link to the appropriate level of both;
- Emergency shelter to provide an immediate and safe alternative to sleeping on the streets, especially for homeless families with children;
- Transitional housing with supportive services to allow for the development of skills that will be needed once permanently housed; and
- Permanent and permanent supportive housing to provide individuals and families with an affordable place to live with services if needed.⁴

Additionally, a CoC system should be well organized and coordinated. This coordination, however,

should not be limited to helping people once they are already homeless. A CoC should have prevention strategies, including but not limited to one-time emergency funds and crisis intervention services.⁵

Continuum of Care Design

The simplest method of design for a Continuum of Care (CoC) is to focus on requirements for the HUD application and the steps necessary to complete it—focusing on projects HUD CoC funds could support (transitional and permanent supportive housing and supportive services) as opposed to a range of assistance including prevention and outreach.⁶

For CoCs that wish to use a more comprehensive approach and develop a long-range, collaborative, and strategic plan, HUD developed a five step approach to planning a CoC:

- Organizing an annual CoC planning process that includes identifying desired outcomes and defining roles and responsibilities for the specific organizations and government bodies involved;
- Collecting needs data and completing an inventory of mainstream resources;
- Determining gaps in the current community process;
- Developing both short- and long-term strategies; and
- Establishing action steps and identifying a process for monitoring implementation of identified strategies.⁷

One of the most important considerations when developing a CoC is to evaluate community needs and priorities. For example, Balance of State CoCs typically include primarily non-urban areas or some of a state’s small cities and these CoCs should take into account that the needs and resources of homeless people and programs in rural areas will be different than those metropolitan areas.⁸

Endnotes

¹ Burt et al. 2002. Evaluation of Continuums of Care for Homeless People. Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

² Ibid.

³ US Department of Housing and Urban Development's *Trainer Guide to Continuum of Care Planning and Implementation?*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Burt et al. 2002. Evaluation of Continuums of Care for Homeless People. Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

⁷ US Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2001. *Guide to Continuum of Care Planning and Implementation: Continuum of Care Planning Tasks and Outcomes.*

⁸ US Department of Housing and Urban Development. *Continuum of Care for States.*

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