CASE STUDY

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Housing Coalition for the Homeless

Resolving Homelessness with Permanent Solutions

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SARA MARTINEZ
Vice President of Development at Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County

INTRODUCTION TO THE ORGANIZATION

In the spring of 2009, the national Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act was signed into law and mandated several changes, including an increase in prevention resources and an emphasis on performance. Shaun Donovan, the secretary of HUD at the time, charged agencies to demonstrate that federal Continuum of Care (CoC) funding was making an impact on the underlying causes of homelessness within the community and being used effectively. A streamlined approach was necessary to drive agencies toward collaborated and strengthened efforts to abide by the HEARTH Act requirements, and in 2010, the Federal government created the Opening Doors comprehensive plan to prevent and end homelessness.

In Houston, a PIT count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons in 2011 showed a 25.2 percent increase (8,538 total) compared to the prior year. Before 2012, agencies worked in silos and were unable to effectively communicate, analyze data and relay information, which limited overall effectiveness in both Harris and Fort Bend counties. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) that was used by agencies was functioning mainly as a one-way tool where data went in but did not come out in ways that would inform the decisions being made or the work.

In 2012, Houston was identified by HUD as a priority community. "It was a lot of silos," explained Sara Martinez. "Partners were not really talking to one another. It was very hard to understand whether each of these agencies was serving different people or whether we were all serving the same people in multiple different locations. Were some individuals being served twice while other vulnerable people being left out of the equation?"

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But far from being demoralized, The Houston Coalition for the Homeless—selected to be the lead agency as well as lead HMIS agency for the local CoC—chose to use this HUD priority assignment as an opportunity. With HUD's identification as a priority community came access to increased funding and technical assistance from HUD, which could be harnessed to effect real, long-term change. They determined to turn their challenge into an opportunity.

The Coalition for the Homeless held a multi-day planning charette to inform a comprehensive plan forward. Because individual services had been operating in silos, it had been impossible to effectively communicate, analyze data, or relay information, severely hampering efficacy. To address this, the Coalition invited all community stakeholders to join, hear expert discussion of the issues at hand, and provide input and feedback from their own experiences.

Together with HUD's technical assistance, all stakeholders agreed on a community action plan that established strategies and priorities modeled around the federal Open Doors plan, and the Coalition launched Eccovia's ClientTrack as their new HMIS platform to facilitate coordination and communication between disparate community partners and service providers.

The Comprehensive Community Action Plan

In 2015, the Houston Coalition for the Homeless retitled their CoC as The Way Home to better connect with community partners and free the work of eliminating homeless from abstractions and acronyms that, while helpful for administrative purposes, can serve to distance the work from the reality of the people whose lives are impacted by it. The first action plan was officially released, outlining critical goals for the organization for ending chronic homelessness, veteran homelessness, family and youth homelessness, and finally all homelessness.

The combination of the new technology and comprehensive action plan led to unprecedented collaboration among homeless service agencies in the greater Houston area. Local agencies and service providers within The Way Home CoC can share HMIS data and communicate in real time, allowing organizations to collaborate with one another on specific client cases, leading to more effective and efficient services. The open communication has allowed agencies to brainstorm integrated ideas to further improve the homeless situation. ClientTrack's data dashboard displays real-time information about homelessness and tracks results over time, which helped in relaying results across agencies and to the government.

In 2016, the Coalition updated its goal to end family and youth homelessness into two separate goals, dividing youth homelessness and family homelessness into distinct categories. Further analysis of the data showed that there are significant differences in how each of these populations experiences homelessness in Houston, and so this division would aim to more effectively serve each population and address their unique needs and circumstances.

Outcomes

Today, the Coalition is now one of the leading agencies of its kind in the United States. Thanks to the cross-agency collaboration and evaluation made possibly by ClientTrack, the organization has seen dramatic successes since 2012, including:

Over 22,000 individuals placed in permanent housing

54% decrease in overall homelessness

90% success rate for local housing programs

And of the initial goals outlined in the community action plan, the Coalition succeeded in bringing an effective end to Veteran homelessness in June 2015. By maintaining the inventory with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Coalition's partnerships with them, the Coalition has been able to house any veteran who presents to a coordinated access hub within 30 days. Further, since 2016 the Coalition's counts of those experiencing homelessness has discovered no families with minor children living unsheltered.

With ClientTrack, the Coalition had a reliable source of data quality that helped inform strategy and decision-making. ClientTrack provided the clarity and insight into the data necessary to allow the Coalition and partner agencies to tell the stories of their successes and struggles, as well as speak to their outcomes and secure funding from public and private entities.

"Most importantly, ClientTrack really gave us the ability to tell the story of a successful system," says Sara Martinez Vice President of Development at Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County. "The ability to analyze trends and see the patterns only visible by aggregating and visualizing data makes that possible."

"It's been powerful as we work with our partners who had a lot of understandable skepticism, because it's been a shift. We have partners who do street outreach for clients who may not go to their housing program. They may get assessed and end up at another program, so this real kind of sharing of resources, I think there is a lot of worry about how they will tell their story to my funders."

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>
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This, she suggests, might be one of the Coalition's greatest successes: engaging with their funders to tell their system's story. Today, funders familiar with the Coalition and The Way home expect homeless services agencies to be partners with The Way Home, providing even stronger motivation to truly engage in coordination of services.

"Being able to tell a successful system story is good—not just for the public and for your funders, but good for that partner agency buy in to the work." — Sara Martinez

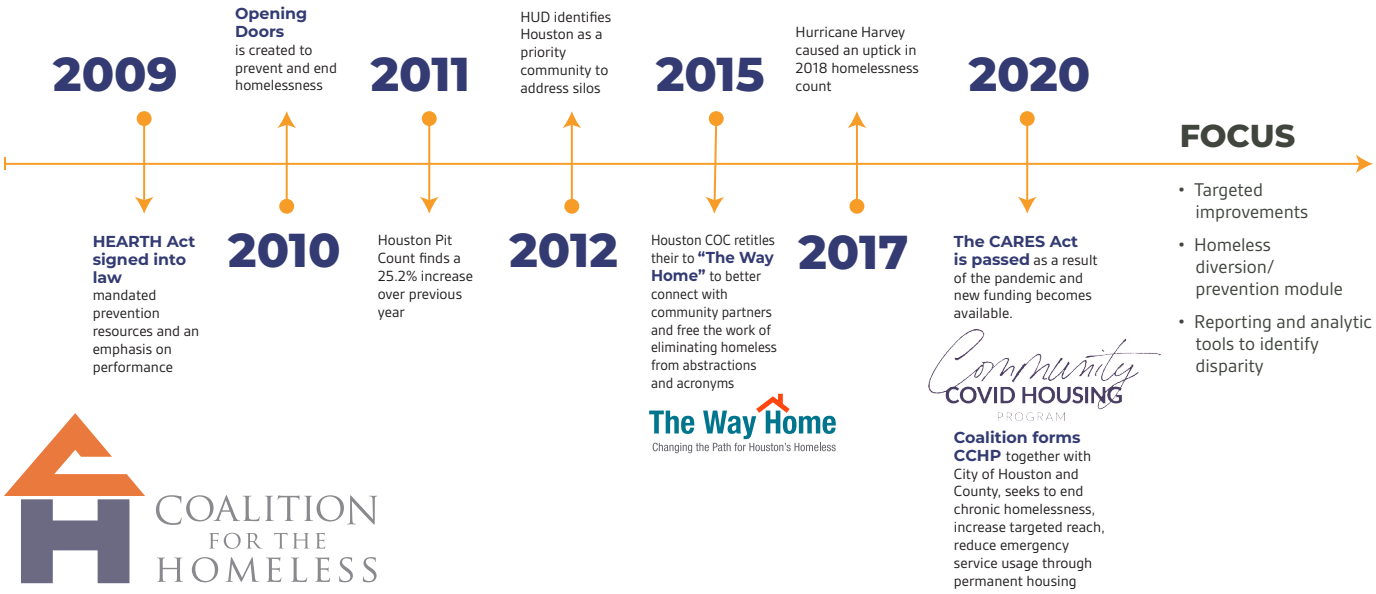
The Community COVID Housing Program

But it can be challenging to tell the story of an effective system when natural disasters and other complications provide additional stressors on vulnerable populations outside ordinary circumstances.

In August 2017, Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas and Louisiana, causing severe flooding in Houston and resulting in over 100 deaths. Many people were displaced, and consequently, the Coalition saw a significant uptick in overall homelessness in the 2018 count, particularly in unsheltered homelessness. Of those surveyed, 15% cited Hurricane Harvey as the cause of their homelessness. As recently as 2020, people experiencing homelessness in Houston cited Harvey or other natural disasters as a cause of their homelessness.

Further complicating efforts to measure efficacy and progress of the Coalition's work came in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the nation in 2020, where 15-20% of unsheltered individuals cited the pandemic as a cause of their homelessness. And owing to the nature of an unprecedented global pandemic, every aspect of the Coalition's work was impacted, including emergency shelter capacity due to social distancing protocols, reticence of people experiencing homelessness to stay in shelters and risk contracting the COVID-19 virus, and a lower number of teams available to perform the count. Consequently, the 2021 count is challenging to compare to years past.

In two critical ways, ClientTrack helped the Coalition navigate this challenge. First, using ClientTrack, the Coalition was able to modify their solution to track the status of clients at their COVID quarantine and recovery facility, allowing the Coalition to minimize the threat of infection and provide safer facilities. Second, referrals generated from ClientTrack



helped the Coalition quickly connect clients with housing navigators and providers as part of the Community COVID Housing Program (CCHP).

After the passage of the CARES Act for COVID-19 relief in 2020, new funding became available through HUD, which most cities used to provide for immediate needs, sheltering individuals in hotel rooms and other temporary housing solutions. The Coalition, however, opted to invest these funds in permanent housing. Together with the City of Houston and Harris County, the Coalition developed the $65 million CCHP, with the City and County committing approximately $57 million in public funds while the Coalition secured an addition $7 million in private contributions to support the effort.

As of the last count, one in seven people cited COVID-19 as the cause for their homelessness. The aim of the CCHP is to permanently house individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness as a result of the economic effects of the coronavirus. While it will be some time before the longitudinal outcomes of this initiative will be apparent, the need for increased housing, shelter, diversion, and supportive services is expected to persist for some time. The CCHP specifically seeks to end chronic homelessness, increase targeted outreach in unincorporated parts of Harris County, continue to reduce emergency service usage, create roughly

Piles of move-in slips from the shelter represent the 900+ people who left the disaster shelters through the Housing For Harvey Program
Photo courtesy of the Coalition for the Homeless

150 new jobs, and support the Coalition's effort to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

Looking Forward: 2021–2026 Community Plan

The Coalition continues to find new ways to combat homelessness. The new Community Plan represents an update to the Coalition's 2015 and 2017 plans for The Way Home Continuum of Care, building on the successes of those plans and finding areas for targeted improvement and opportunities for making homelessness a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience. The updated Community Plan seeks to find these opportunities in improved coordination between providers, government agencies, and the private sector.

Aspects of this plan include homeless diversion. Inspired by successful diversion programs in Boston and Los Angeles, the Coalition is currently piloting a program of diversion case management focused on creative problem solving and rapid resolution. The Coalition's program relies on ClientTrack's flexibility and configurability to build out a prevention module included in the coordinated access assessment to identify cases where diversion would prove most effective.

The plan also seeks to investigate the equity of the Coalition's progress. ClientTrack's reporting and analysis tools enable communities to identify disparities regarding race, gender, age, etc. Data from Harris County, for instance, presents a very concerning racial disparity, where Black individuals comprised under 19% of the population but represented over 56% of the population experiencing homelessness.

"The issue of people of color being disproportionately represented in vulnerable populations, as well as disparities in the quality of service, are issues the Coalition is focused on resolving by looking at means of addressing racial equity and social justice, expanding access to affordable housing, preventing homelessness, strengthening our crisis response system, refining engagement strategies for people living unsheltered, and then building those strong cross-system partnerships."

—Sara Martinez

To learn more about how your organization can benefit from partnering with Eccovia and our industry-leading ClientTrack software, visit **eccovia.com** or call **888.449.6328** to speak with one of our experienced Solution Experts.

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Eccovia provides an industry-leading, care coordination platform for state and county Medicaid waiver programs, refugee resettlement programs, accountable care organizations (ACO), and community-based provider coalitions. Our platform helps agencies collaborate to address the physical, behavioral, and economic factors that improve the overall well-being of individuals and communities.

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