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COLUMBUS AND FRANKLIN COUNTY

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT FINAL REPORT

Prepared for Community Shelter Board by Focus Strategies

09 • 27 • 2024



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The homelessness response system in Columbus and Franklin County, led by Community Shelter Board (CSB), has seen significant success over the years. Notable achievements include:

- CSB has been a national leader in collecting and reporting data, and CSB has been looked to as a model for using performance management and data-driven decision-making in homelessness response.
- CSB's design as a centralized funding structure for the region's homelessness response system was innovative when first implemented and is still seen as an advantageous model for ensuring a coordinated and efficient allocation of resources.
- The Columbus and Franklin County community has had sustained success in reducing homelessness - especially unsheltered homelessness - among families and pregnant people.

Despite the system's strong history and foundation, homelessness has increased in recent years¹ because the community context has changed. The region is experiencing an affordable housing crisis that is more acute than national trends:



Median gross rent has increased by 34%, from \$887 in 2017 to \$1,186 in 2022. Over the same period, the national median gross rent increased less steeply, by 29%.²



Rental vacancy rates fell by 40% from 6.3% in 2017 to 3.8% in 2022. Over the same period, national vacancy rates fell less severely, by 19%.³

¹ From 2013 to 2024, the number of people counted in the annual Point-in-Time increased from 1,472 individuals to 2,380, a 62% increase. Unsheltered homelessness has more than doubled, from 244 individuals in 2013 to 514 individuals in 2024. Point-in-Time estimates are published by CSB and can be accessed at <https://www.csb.org/how-we-do-it/point-in-time-count>.

² U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2017 and ACS 2022 5-year estimates, B25064: Median Gross Rent (Dollars), accessed March 6, 2024, www.data.census.gov; U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2017 and ACS 2022 5-year estimates, B25031: Median Gross Rent by Bedrooms, accessed February 26, 2024, www.data.census.gov.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, "Housing Vacancies and Homeownership: Annual Statistics: 2022, Table 6," accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/data/prevann.html>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Housing Vacancies and Homeownership: Annual Statistics: 2022, Table 3," accessed February 26, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/data/prevann.html>.





Only 26 housing units are available per 100 extremely low-income households compared with 34 housing units nationally.⁴

Amid these changes, CSB on behalf of key funders in the region, commissioned Focus Strategies to conduct a Comprehensive Community Assessment (“Assessment”) to describe the current state of the homelessness response system and recommend changes to move the community toward its desired future state. This desired future state includes being a community that:

- Grows in a way that works for all;
- Maximizes livability and quality life for all; and,
- Has an equitable, stable, and dynamic homelessness response system to respond to the community’s current and anticipated needs.

Findings from the Assessment indicate the homelessness response system must be scaled to align with the changing housing market and population dynamics.

In addition to the community and economic shifts that necessitate scaling the homelessness response system to match current and forecasted needs, several other challenges need to be addressed. Currently, Black households are overrepresented in the homelessness response system. Creating the equitable and livable community desired requires addressing this disparity. In addition, although the system is right-sized⁵ for families, it is not scaled for adults without children, the largest population of people experiencing homelessness. Finally, the system, and particularly the shelters, relies on one-time and expiring funding, impacting the system’s and providers’ sense of stability and ability to plan to effectively address homelessness in the coming years.





Recommendations included here are designed to scale the homelessness response system to meet the needs of a growing homeless population given projected market conditions. These recommendations include taking each intervention type to scale and optimizing the homelessness response system.

⁴ National Low Income Housing Coalition, “The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes,” March 2024, <https://nlihc.org/gap>.

⁵ “Right-sized” means that there are enough safe and dignified shelter and housing opportunities to meet the needs of the population, as indicated by no family sleeping outside or in vehicles.



CSB and providers are making several changes to increase the capacity of the homelessness response system and update program models to better meet community needs, which the homelessness response system can build on. Recommendations are tailored to address identified challenges, build on system strengths, and make progress toward the desired future state, including strategies to:

-  **Move upstream** by diverting more people from experiencing homelessness
-  **Optimize the system** by improving performance within critical interventions and expanding subsidies available
-  **Scale housing** by adding units of rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing
-  **Enhance equity, engagement, and learning** throughout the system

The region has a history of conducting extensive planning and research, but it has not always achieved the alignment required to follow through on needed efforts. If action is not taken, the homelessness response system is likely to continue to struggle to meet current demand and continue to fall short on the goal of reducing homelessness.

A bias toward taking action is needed to hedge against the risk of serious decline in existing system capacity and to support changes needed to more effectively address homelessness. CSB, funders, and community leaders will be best positioned to make progress toward becoming a community that is livable, equitable, and promotes well-being for all, by recommitting to the current funding structure, identifying stable funds to replace the one-time funding supporting system operations, and swiftly creating opportunities to implement the recommendations in this Assessment.



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INTRODUCTION

Community Shelter Board (CSB), on behalf of key funders and leaders of homelessness response in the region - the City of Columbus, Franklin County, and the Columbus Partnership - commissioned Focus Strategies to conduct a Comprehensive Community Assessment for Columbus and Franklin County. The community is facing an affordable housing crisis, with only 26 housing units available for every 100 extremely low-income households,⁶ and is on a growth trajectory, with the Franklin County population projected to increase more than 25% between 2020 and 2050.⁷ With the community at an inflection point, leaders recognized the need to analyze current trends, project future needs, and lay the groundwork for achieving the future they envision.

"We're growing... We're getting bigger. We're attracting more attention. We're attracting more industry. So, we want to do this right."

- Steering Committee member

This Comprehensive Community Assessment (referred to as the Assessment in this report) describes and analyzes the community's homelessness response system, the coordinated response to prevent homelessness and connect people experiencing homelessness to safe shelter and permanent housing options. The homelessness response system in Columbus and Franklin County is coordinated by CSB and relies on the partnership and collaboration of 16 contracted service and housing providers to administer a range of homeless-targeted interventions including diversion and prevention, outreach, emergency shelter, rapid rehousing (RRH), transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing (PSH) programs.

For this Assessment, Focus Strategies analyzed the design and functioning of the homelessness response system, including performance strengths and weaknesses within the current and anticipated local housing market context. The Assessment was guided by a Steering Committee, composed of 18 community leaders representing various sectors and organizations. A list of the Steering Committee members is included in the **Appendix**.

⁶ National Low Income Housing Coalition, "The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes," March 2024, <https://nlihc.org/gap>.

⁷ Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, "2020 to 2050 County Forecasts," accessed August 21, 2024,

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/cd446109151f474db74b13fa0795023c/page/County-Forecasts/>.



Findings and corresponding recommendations were informed by a series of data collection efforts and analyses including:

- a review and analysis of population and housing market data and projections;
- reviews of local planning documents and reports;
- interviews, focus groups, and surveys with community members and stakeholders;
- an analysis comparing the proportion of shelter and permanent housing over time in Columbus/Franklin County and comparable communities;
- an analysis of the structure of the homelessness response system; and,
- quantitative analyses and system modeling using local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data.

Using data from these sources and a community-engagement process,^{8,9} the Assessment seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the current state of the homelessness response system in Franklin County, as articulated by representative community stakeholders and as reflected in the data?
- What are the primary concerns about activities and strategies currently underway to respond to homelessness and the housing needs of extremely low-income residents?
- What could work better to more equitably, efficiently, and effectively respond to homelessness now and into the future?
- What are the community's options for investing resources? What are the estimated impacts of those choices on the size of the unhoused population?
- What is the community's vision for its homelessness response in the future? What strategies are most likely to realize that vision?

In answering these questions, the Assessment focuses on what it would take to scale the homelessness response system to match corresponding community growth in light of the

⁸ A complete description of the Assessment process and methodology is included in the Technical Report.

⁹ RAMA Consulting led community engagement efforts for the Assessment. A Key Themes Report, detailing findings and input from engagement strategies is included in the Technical Report.



housing crisis. While increasing the supply of affordable housing is regularly identified as a community priority, the need is great, and housing takes time to develop. Even if significant efforts occur to expand the affordable housing supply, in the immediate and near future, homelessness is expected to rise. The costs of addressing unmet housing needs related to homelessness are typically cumulative. Each year that more people remain homeless leads to additional unmet needs in the following year, leading to a larger unhoused population with increasingly higher service needs associated with longer durations of homelessness. To avoid developing intractable unsheltered homelessness as the community grows, preventing homelessness from rising in the coming years is critical.

Predictive modeling was used to estimate the projected increase in homelessness given anticipated trends of continued population growth and even lower vacancy rates and higher rents. To address the projected rise in homelessness, predictive modeling results were used to estimate costs for adding housing and related programs and supports as well as adjusting program models within the homelessness response system to yield improved outcomes.¹⁰ Feedback from stakeholders was used to refine the models and to develop recommendation for changes to program models.

Many stakeholders also shared insights related to the need for a community-wide transformation, broader than improvements to homelessness response, which are briefly addressed in this report. This report is accompanied by a Technical Report which includes additional details and information developed through the Assessment process that may be of greatest use to those charged with implementing the recommendations.^{11, 12}

¹⁰ The cost estimates included do not account for the full costs to maintain the homelessness response system as it currently operates or costs to create the changes recommended. Types of costs not estimated are included in the section on [Outcomes and Costs of System Changes](#).

¹¹ Additional information about the Assessment methodology and process can be found in the Technical Report.

¹² Focus Strategies has created a standalone document for the Assessment recommendations, which includes information contained in this report along with additional guidance for CSB and the community to consider as they begin the implementation process. This is included in the Technical Report.



COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The Columbus and Franklin County community is at a critical crossroads. The region is experiencing notable population growth. From 1990 to 2020, Franklin County grew from 965,600 to 1,324,414, a 37% increase.¹³ Projections from the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission indicate Franklin County will see continued growth in the coming decades. By 2050, Franklin County population is projected to reach 1.666 million residents, an increase of over 25% from 2020 population estimates.¹⁴

At the same time, the housing market is becoming more constrained. Compared to national trends, the Columbus metropolitan region has experienced more acute challenges with housing affordability over the past several years.



Median gross rent has increased by 34%, from \$887 in 2017 to \$1,186 in 2022. Over the same period, the national median gross rent increased less steeply, by 29%.¹⁵



Rental vacancy rates fell by 40% from 6.3% in 2017 to 3.8% in 2022. Over the same period, national vacancy rates fell less severely, by 19%.¹⁶



Only 26 housing units are available per 100 extremely low-income households compared with 34 housing units nationally.¹⁷

¹³ Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, "2020 to 2050 County Forecasts," accessed August 21, 2024,

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/cd446109151f474db74b13fa0795023c/page/County-Forecasts/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2017 and ACS 2022 5-year estimates, B25064: Median Gross Rent (Dollars), accessed March 6, 2024, www.data.census.gov; U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2017 and ACS 2022 5-year estimates, B25031: Median Gross Rent by Bedrooms, accessed February 26, 2024, www.data.census.gov.

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Housing Vacancies and Homeownership: Annual Statistics: 2022, Table 6," accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/data/prevann.html>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Housing Vacancies and Homeownership: Annual Statistics: 2022, Table 3," accessed February 26, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/data/prevann.html>.

¹⁷ National Low Income Housing Coalition, "The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes," March 2024, <https://nlihc.org/gap>.



With continued population growth, low-income residents will increasingly struggle to access affordable housing, and homelessness will increase without substantial intervention. The community has invested in several strategies to address the need for additional affordable housing. Columbus voters passed bond packages in 2019 and 2022 to fund affordable housing development. Franklin County founded the Affordable Housing Magnet Fund in 2019 to provide gap financing for eligible affordable housing developments. The City of Columbus updated its zoning code, known as Zone In,¹⁸ in part to help increase the number of new housing units developed. Even with these efforts, the community is not developing affordable units at the rate required to begin to close the affordable housing gap.

“We’re an economically strong community. We’re growing. There’s great prosperity in our community. Unfortunately, what that leads to is...an affordable housing crisis. We don’t have enough houses being built to keep the affordable price at a point where we’re not growing the number of folks who need [homeless] services.”
- Steering Committee member

As the community seeks to transform its homelessness response system, there are several factors that will shape the work. In Columbus and Franklin County, as across the nation, Black households are overrepresented in the homeless population. Fifty-three percent of people counted during the 2024 Point-in-Time Count identified as Black or African American,¹⁹ compared to 26% of the overall population.²⁰ Preventing and ending homelessness, therefore, is a matter of equity. Throughout the Assessment process, community leaders, stakeholders, and members expressed a desire to create an equitable community and promote well-being and fairness for all. A few Steering Committee members interviewed for the Assessment theorized that because homelessness and housing insecurity disproportionately impacts Black neighborhoods and households, it is not recognized as a significant community issue in the same way it might be if it affected all neighborhoods and populations equally. Without community-wide recognition of the scale of the problem, these Steering Committee members noted it may be more difficult to create community buy-in for additional investments.

¹⁸ Columbus City Council enacted a new zoning code on July 29, 2024. Additional information on Zone In can be found at <https://zone-in-columbus.hub.arcgis.com/>.

¹⁹ The 2024 Point-in-Time Count report can be accessed at <https://www.csb.org/how-we-do-it/point-in-time-count>.

²⁰ American Community Survey, 1 Year Estimates, Table DP05, accessible at <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP1Y2022.DP05?q=franklin%20county,%20oh>.



The homelessness response system in Columbus and Franklin County, led by CSB, has been recognized over the years for several innovations, including its dedication to strategic data collection and reporting, centralized and carefully leveraged funding and resource allocation strategies, and an overt and significantly successful commitment to eliminating homelessness among families and pregnant people. The track record and infrastructure in place are admirable – it is worthy of note that many communities are working toward the centralized and leveraged funding model that CSB has been fortunate to have for many years. However, the local housing market has changed dramatically, and changes are needed to match programs and practices to current housing market dynamics and scale the homelessness response system to meet current and anticipated needs.

In recent years, the Columbus and Franklin County community has developed multiple plans and reports to understand and address pressing community issues, including the affordable housing crisis, equitable economic recovery and prosperity, and poverty.²¹ The community appears to be comfortable collecting and examining data and discussing problems and the need for change, but frank discussion of racial inequities in the community is not common. Through the course of the Assessment, community leaders and members identified creating an equitable community as a goal, but generally did not speak directly to the impact of racism and segregation on community wellbeing, even when prompted to discuss racial disparities in outcomes.

The community's sophistication with research and planning has not been matched with comparable action. Focus Strategies reviewed dozens of community documents, plans, and reports during the Assessment process. These documents focused on the current status of community issues, goals, and intentions to resolve challenges including affordable housing development, economic recovery, and poverty. However, information on the implementation of these plans and reports, including what efforts had been made, the impacts of those actions, and any pivots the community made given what they learned during the implementation process, were scarce.

²¹ Focus Strategies conducted a comprehensive document review as part of the Assessment. While most comparably sized communities provide a handful of documents as part of a document review process, Columbus and Franklin County had dozens of relevant planning documents, assessments, and reports to review. The Document Review Summary, completed for the Assessment, is included in the Technical Report.



Making substantial system- or community-wide changes requires participation from multiple sectors, organizations, and stakeholders. Community leaders have historically taken an approach to decision-making known as “The Columbus Way.”²² The Columbus Way emphasizes the public and private sectors coming together to solve community issues. However, some Steering Committee members reported a cultural value of agreeableness within The Columbus Way that can discourage people from raising alternate points of view. New leaders expressed a desire to create more transparent, open, and inclusive spaces where ideas can be challenged, and solutions developed. By embracing disagreement and different ideas, The Columbus Way could support established and new leaders to create more diverse ideas and solutions.

SYSTEM PROJECTIONS

A homelessness response system is a coordinated response to prevent homelessness and connect people experiencing homelessness to safe shelter and permanent housing options. The Columbus and Franklin County system includes the coordinated delivery of street outreach, diversion and coordinated entry, prevention, shelter, rapid rehousing, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing. The system is led by CSB and implemented by 16 contracted community providers. More than 15,000 individuals are assisted each year.²³

The homelessness response system is divided into family, single adult, and youth subsystems. Each of these subpopulations follows different processes to enter the system and, often, are served by different providers and programs. Shelter is a substantial portion of the system’s inventory (see Table 1).

²² The term “Columbus Way” was coined in a 2015 Harvard Business Review case study examining Columbus’s model of public-private partnerships and approach to development and investment.

²³ Community Shelter Board, “Annual Report FY2023,” p. 9. Accessed August 21, 2024 at <https://www.csb.org/cdn/file-CSB-Annual-Report-FY2023.pdf>.



Table 1. System Capacity²⁴

Program Type	Number of Beds/Slots
Emergency shelter and transitional housing	1,321
Rapid rehousing	545
Permanent supportive housing	3,486

According to the community’s 2023 Housing Inventory Count, Columbus and Franklin County had around 1,300 year-round shelter and transitional housing beds available and more than 4,000 beds of permanent housing including both permanent supportive housing beds and rapid rehousing slots.

Permanent housing opportunities are needed for people to move out of shelters and out of homelessness. Permanent supportive housing is designed to promote long-term housing retention and have little turnover. Rapid rehousing is designed to turnover regularly, but there are relatively few rapid rehousing slots in the Columbus homelessness response system compared to the capacity of other program types. Given the greatest capacity is in shelter and in permanent supportive housing with low rates of turnover, there are limited opportunities for people experiencing homelessness to access permanent housing support through the system.

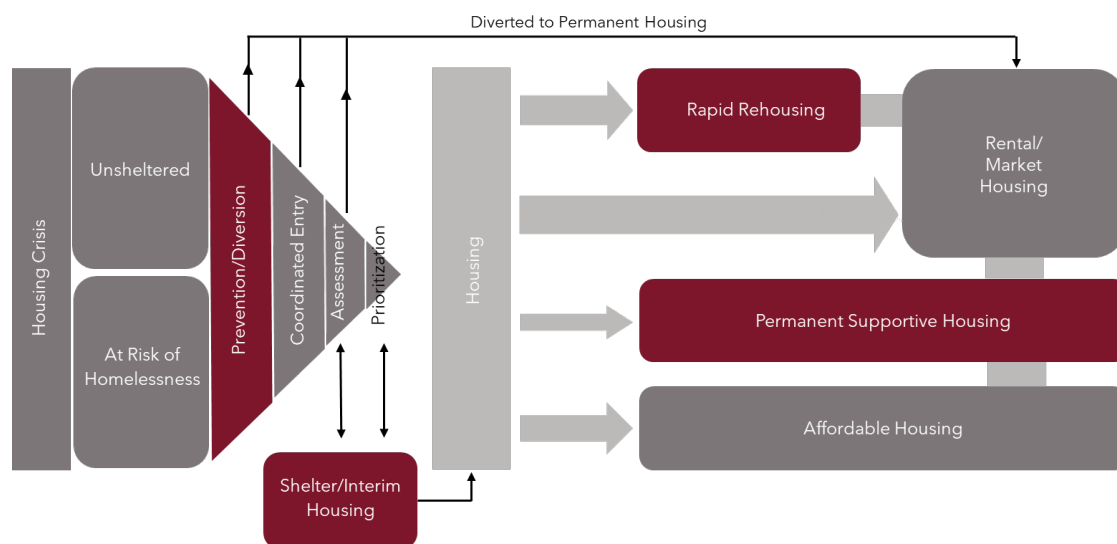
Figure 1 illustrates an optimized homelessness response system. In an optimized system, people are diverted from the system into other safe housing options whenever possible, and those who are not diverted move quickly through the system and back into permanent housing. The visual demonstrates there are various paths that can be taken to access permanent housing, but all components of the system are ultimately designed to ensure people are housed as quickly and equitably as possible. The red boxes are interventions that provide key leverage points in the homelessness response system; improving the performance and/or growing the capacity of these leverage points can affect the rate of homelessness.

²⁴ HUD 2023 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs: Housing Inventory Count, OH-503: Columbus/Franklin County CoC. Accessed July 10, 2024 at

https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_HIC_CoC_OH-503-2023_OH_2023.pdf



Figure 1. Optimized Homelessness Response System



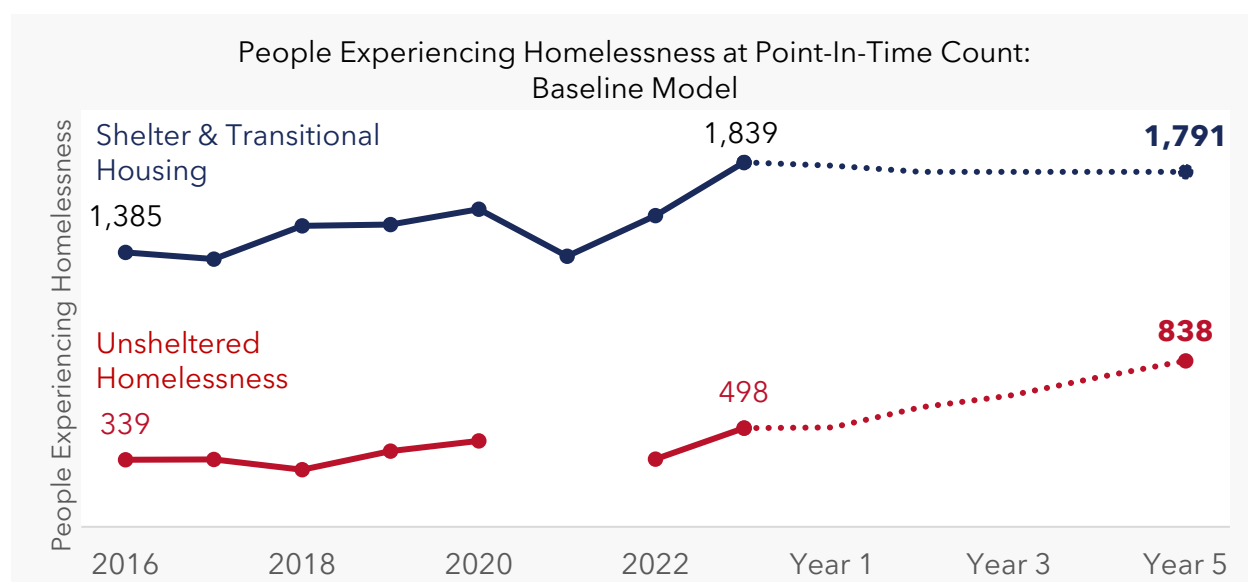
The different components of the homelessness response system are interconnected, as people move through different interventions depending on their needs and availability. System modeling explores this interconnectedness, using local data to estimate future rates of homelessness. Looking at the entire homelessness response system, rather than distinct components like the shelter system or rapid rehousing programs in isolation, enables community leaders to understand how investing in different strategies can yield different outcomes. Importantly, system modeling illustrates that the greatest impact comes from investing in a system-level strategy that involves changes to multiple components.

Focus Strategies developed a *baseline model* and several *future state models* for this Assessment. The baseline model uses current system performance and assumes that the community's housing affordability crisis drives a decline in program outcomes and an increase in the number of people entering homelessness each year. Future state models illustrate how rates of homelessness may change from the baseline model if the system invests in different strategies. A summary of the baseline model is included as Figure 2. It projects an increase in homelessness, including a 68% increase in unsheltered homelessness over five years if the community continues on the current path.²⁵

²⁵ Additional information on the system modeling completed for the Assessment is included in this report, along with supplemental documents in the Technical Report.



Figure 2. Baseline Model for Columbus and Franklin County



Community factors such as rental costs and vacancy rates impact rates of homelessness but are outside of the control of the homelessness response system. Therefore, targeted efforts within the system are needed to scale and optimize the system to counter these market dynamics and achieve the desired outcomes.

The community has expanded shelter over the past decade. Between 2013 and 2022, the number of shelter beds increased by 54% while permanent housing beds grew by 47%. This nearly 1:1 ratio is out of step with approaches in other communities and with what is known about system dynamics which show that housing must increase at greater rates than shelter to reduce homelessness. Other communities with comparable population growth, housing markets, and homelessness response systems have invested more heavily in housing. Their number of shelter beds have remained flat or fallen slightly between 2013 and 2022 while their number of permanent housing beds have increased, in some cases almost 250%.²⁶

Local data indicate the homelessness response system requires a different resource strategy to yield different outcomes. In recent years, the performance of the shelter system has declined as the housing market has become more expensive with fewer vacancies. From fiscal year 2015 to fiscal year 2023, the average number of days households used shelter increased

²⁶ An Analysis of Comparable Communities, analyzing the resource strategies of Columbus and Franklin County compared to other key cities is included in the Technical Report.



from 49 days to 69 days while the percentage of successful housing outcomes across all populations decreased from 32% to 18%.²⁷ As the community has invested in increasing its shelter capacity and outcomes for shelter have declined, people are not able to move out of the shelters and out of homelessness into housing. Adjusting the approach for Columbus and Franklin County should include shifting the proportion of investments in different system components, specifically increasing diversion and permanent housing, as well as investing in strategies to improve performance throughout the system. These recommended shifts are detailed in the section on **Recommendations for Homelessness Response System Change**.

SYSTEM FINDINGS

This section summarizes key findings about the system's performance strengths and weaknesses within the current and anticipated local housing market context. Outcomes of the baseline model along with findings from other analyses conducted during the Assessment illustrate how the homelessness response system is currently functioning and indicate where changes can be made to improve system efficacy.

A. System Overview

A right-sized system means that there are enough safe and dignified shelter and housing opportunities in the community so that no one is sleeping outside or in vehicles. Analyses indicate the system is right-sized for families but not for single adults. For several years, the community has committed to ending homelessness for families, a commitment expressed in documents analyzed during the Assessment process and referenced by some CSB staff members and Steering Committee members in meetings, interviews, and other discussions. CSB has followed through on its commitment to families and has created and maintained a system in which families can reliably access shelter and few families experience unsheltered homelessness. Based on the outcomes seen for families, the family system is right-sized. Some Steering Committee members emphasized funding is not provided through a reliable, stable, and sustainable mechanism, such that maintaining the system the community has worked hard to achieve is not secure.

²⁷ Community Shelter Board, "System & Program Indicator Report, FY2023: 7/1/22 - 6/30/23," accessed August 21, 2024 at <https://www.csb.org/cdn/files-FY2023-Annual-Programs-Indicator-Report.pdf>. CSB's report defines the average length of shelter stay as the average cumulative days of shelter use by unduplicated households.



The system serving single adults²⁸ is not comparably scaled. Over 95% of people (490 out of 514) staying in unsheltered locations on the night of the 2024 Point-in-Time Count were single adults. CSB has made efforts to provide more access to shelter for single adults, and the proportion of single adults who were sheltered increased between 2023 and 2024, however, there is still a significant gap in shelter resources to serve this population.²⁹

Community perception aligns with local data that indicates the system is not scaled for single adults. Community members surveyed perceived single adults and couples without children as among the most underserved in the community. Given the current and anticipated housing market conditions, the system must sustain the progress made with families and greatly invest in strategies for single adults to meet the current need as well as prevent a rise in unsheltered homelessness.

Structural strengths are leverageable

To make these changes, the homelessness response system has strengths that can be built upon, including its funding structure. CSB's structure is advantageous. As the lead agency for the Continuum of Care and the homelessness response system, CSB has been designated as a Unified Funding Agency by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In this role, CSB holds responsibility for securing federal funds and contracting with local providers. The Unified Funding Agency designation makes CSB and the community eligible to access more federal resources than comparable communities.³⁰

The involvement of the private sector is an additional advantage of the current structure. The private sector is a major funder of solutions and is heavily involved in community discussions and planning. Having private funding available is a significant advantage which increases system scale and flexibility. However, depending on the source, private funding is often directed toward specific funder goals and priorities, which may not match where the greatest needs are. For example, in Columbus and Franklin County, the commitment to end homelessness among families and pregnant people has been supported with substantial

²⁸ Single adults are people who are experiencing homelessness without minor children with them. They are not necessarily single or not parents.

²⁹ The full 2024 Point-in-Time Count report can be accessed on CSB's website at <https://www.csb.org/how-we-do-it/point-in-time-count>.

³⁰ A brief titled "Local Context and Funding Models Summary" that overviews the funding model used in Columbus and Franklin County to secure and allocate federal funding for homelessness is included in the Technical Report.



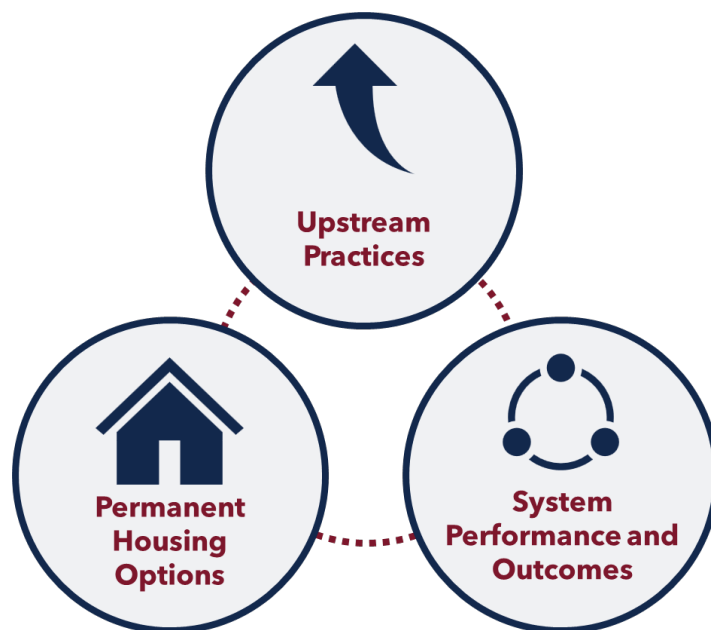
private funding. While families and pregnant people need assistance, many other populations are experiencing homelessness and single adults comprise the largest proportion of the population. Given the anticipated rise in homelessness among individuals, the flexibility of private resources may be required at new levels to ensure community goals are met.

In recent years, some funders have facilitated and managed their own funding processes rather than directing resources to CSB as the lead agency of the community's homelessness response system. This has made it more difficult to align resources across the community and invest strategically to achieve greater impact. In addition, homelessness response organizations report relying on one-time and year-to-year funding. Providers report growing uncertainty that impacts the stability of programs and the non-profits that deliver them.

Current efforts can be built upon

Several changes are already underway to increase the capacity of the homelessness response system and update program models to better meet community needs. Findings in the following sections acknowledge the work to-date and identify areas of opportunity. These findings are presented with consideration for the desired future state for the Columbus and Franklin County community, articulated by the Steering Committee: being a community that grows in a way that works for all, in which livability and quality of life are maximized, and that includes an equitable, stable, and dynamic homelessness response system.

Figure 3. Diagram of System Findings



As illustrated in Figure 3, achieving this desired future state requires examining upstream practices to prevent homelessness, performance and outcomes of the system, and the capacity of permanent housing options. In addition, it includes understanding practices that span the system and impact how stakeholders are engaged, and information is used to drive system change. Findings in each of these components are detailed in the next sections.

B. Upstream Practices

The desired future state for Columbus and Franklin County includes creating an equitable community that maximizes livability and quality of life for all. Given there are pronounced disparities in who experiences homelessness, with Black households disproportionately represented in the homelessness response system, addressing upstream practices that can prevent people from experiencing homelessness is an equity issue.

Robust diversion with flexible funding assistance is a best practice for helping households avoid homelessness. In Columbus and Franklin County, there is a lack of robust diversion with flexible financial assistance for single adults. A newly homeless family is offered support multiple times to help them obtain safe housing outside of the shelter system if possible, including access to financial assistance to prevent or end their homelessness. Single adults do not receive comparable offers of assistance.

Based on the baseline system model, inflow into the homelessness response system is projected to continue increasing, with single adults comprising the largest proportion of newly homeless households. Helping more single adults to connect with other safe housing options and avoid entering the homelessness response system can effectively reduce overall rates of homelessness. The desire to move solutions upstream and adopt a more preventative approach was also expressed by several Steering Committee members during interviews.³¹

In addition to gaps in diversion, options to support households to rapidly exit homelessness are limited. Although some funding is available to help households quickly resolve homelessness, more flexibility is needed. Direct Client Assistance (DCA) provides a centralized source of funding for various programs to use. It centralizes several different

³¹ The desire to move upstream was expressed by many Assessment Steering Committee members in interviews conducted as part of the Assessment. The Steering Committee Interview Summary is included in the Technical Report.



funding sources³² into a single pot that providers can access for eligible households or individuals. Program guidelines indicate that, depending on the source used, DCA can be used to help divert households from homelessness as well as support households to regain permanent housing. Examples of eligible assistance includes, but is not limited to, application fees, moving expenses, security deposits, short-term rental assistance, utility payments, and landlord incentives. This type of flexible program is a prized resource in most communities because a specific short-term financial barrier to housing for many households can often be resolved. However, DCA includes a requirement that to receive assistance a household must prove they will immediately be able to sustain the housing costs, which makes the resource harder to use.

The centralized nature of DCA, in which CSB ensures the household requesting assistance meets eligibility requirements and all required documentation is in place, helps ensure compliance with program eligibility and reporting requirements. However, data on the DCA program is not being collected and reported in a manner that allows for performance and outcome reporting. For example, a household may receive initial assistance through DCA and then ongoing assistance through another program, but data is not collected about DCA recipients in a way that allows for reporting on who received DCA, who received DCA and another program, or whether outcomes are different for those who receive DCA versus those who did not. It is also not possible to know whether receiving DCA assistance makes the difference in terms of who gets housed and who remains homeless.

DCA funds have been underspent recently. CSB staff attribute this to challenges identifying affordable and available units on the private market. Despite these funds being underutilized, providers interviewed indicated more flexible funding is needed to meet the needs of the households they serve. This finding indicates there is an opportunity to restructure DCA to better meet both diversion and rehousing needs (covered in the recommendations below).

³² At the time data was gathered for the Assessment, 11 funding sources were centralized in the DCA program. This number can fluctuate as different funding sources become available.



C. System Performance and Outcomes

An important aspect of understanding the current state of the homelessness response system includes assessing performance and outcomes across system components. Findings in this section focus on aspects of shelter and rapid rehousing impacting the performance and projected outcomes of the system.

Input from community leaders indicates shelters are relying on one-time funding. Columbus and Franklin County, like many communities in the country, are currently using COVID-19 related funding sources to fund core homeless system operations, such as emergency shelter. Those funds expire in 2026 and there are no additional federal resources anticipated to fill those gaps.

While CSB and partners are working to identify funds to replace current one-time funding, CSB has also started exploring transitioning to more non-congregate shelter solutions. Many communities across the country are moving toward non-congregate shelter options as they afford greater privacy, may feel safer, and can make shelter an option for people with obligations and ties inconsistent with a congregate shelter environment (such as allowing couples to stay together, accepting pets, and having space for possessions). People experiencing homelessness reported desiring safe shelter options. Increasing the community's ability to provide non-congregate shelter units may help meet this community need and create opportunities to house more people more quickly.

Within rapid rehousing, there are also opportunities to improve performance. As reported in system performance reports published on the CSB website,³³ RRH performance, as measured by the number of people ending the program with housing, has declined over recent years. Program providers and CSB staff tie the decreases in performance to difficulties in securing rental properties that are affordable to the household, which is consistent with findings across the country in communities with significantly rising rental costs. As rents increased and vacancies decreased, the system did not initially adjust the four-month program model to reflect the current housing market. Today, CSB is leading an effort with RRH providers to extend the average length of stay of households enrolled in RRH programs to an average of eight months, recognizing additional time may be needed for households to identify housing

³³ System performance reports and other publications are available at <https://www.csb.org/news-and-publications/publications>.



and increase income to enable them to retain the housing once they are no longer enrolled. CSB reports that with this change, RRH programs are beginning to show improved outcomes.

These adjustments indicate the system is beginning to make changes to align with the current housing market. Although some changes have been made, system modeling indicates the rapid rehousing program model is not yet calibrated to the current housing market and additional changes (covered in the recommendations below) can further improve performance.

Engaging landlords is another component of successfully implementing housing programs that require renting on the private market, such as rapid rehousing. CSB already incentivizes and engages private landlords. Landlords are paid a one-time incentive of \$300 for each studio, \$500 for each one- or two-bedroom unit, and \$750 for each three-bedroom or larger unit upon lease up for committing the unit to house participants in CSB's housing programs for at least two years. Participating landlords may also access a risk mitigation fund that can pay for unit damages, lost rent, or unpaid utilities beyond the rent deposit. Mitigation assistance is capped at twice the Fair Market Rent amount for a one-bedroom unit in the area. For FY 2024, this equals \$2,130.

CSB convenes quarterly learning exchanges for participating property owners and managers. These provide an opportunity for CSB to bring resources, such as information on local building codes or the housing inspection process, to participating landlords. These forums also provide an opportunity for landlords to share their experiences and ideas for program improvement with CSB staff. Recently, participating landlords requested CSB provide training to housing participants on acting as a good tenant, including communicating issues related to property damage or pest control needs in a timely manner.

D. Permanent Housing Options

It is recognized across the community that Columbus and Franklin County has an affordable housing crisis. Housing market factors, such as rental costs, are strong predictors of rates of homelessness. With fewer affordable units, more extremely low-income households are at risk of losing their housing. For those currently experiencing homelessness, it has become more difficult to secure permanent housing and retain that housing over time. Because the gap is severe, rates of homelessness may continue to increase even as the community accelerates the creation of new affordable housing.



Within the homelessness response system, permanent housing resources include rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing. From 2013 to 2022, the homelessness response system increased the number of permanent housing units by about 47%, from 2,529 to 3,725.³⁴ Despite increases in permanent housing resources within the homelessness response system, because of challenges in the housing market, homelessness increased during the same time period.

E. Equity, Engagement, and Learning

The Assessment also examined system improvement practices, including how CSB, providers, and stakeholders use information to design and implement a system that is grounded in community and geared toward learning. As the lead agency for Columbus and Franklin County's homelessness response system, CSB is responsible for convening the Continuum of Care (CoC). A CoC is a group of organizations and individuals charged with coordinating activities of the community's homelessness response system. The CoC is responsible for allocating the majority of federal funding for homelessness in the region in a manner that advances local goals and aligns with federal priorities.³⁵ The Columbus and Franklin County CoC has several committees overseeing different CoC responsibilities. Two committees, the Citizens Advisory Council and the Youth Action Board, are comprised of people with lived experience of homelessness and provide opportunities for members to review and comment on plans, policies, program standards, system strategy materials, and funding applications. The CoC reserves seats on the CoC and on the CoC Board for representatives from the Citizen Advisory Council and the Youth Action Board. Even with these opportunities, engagement options for people with lived experience are limited.

Nationally, engaging people with lived experience of homelessness is a recognized best practice and communities are testing different methods to more effectively involve people with lived experience in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the homelessness response system. When engaged during the Assessment, people with lived experience of homelessness reported the homelessness response system is challenging to navigate and

³⁴ Additional information on changes in system inventory and rates of homelessness can be found in a Comparable Communities Analysis in the Technical Report.

³⁵ The Continuum of Care Program is administered at the federal level by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Additional information on the Continuum of Care Program can be found at <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/>. More information on the Columbus and Franklin County CoC can be found at <https://www.columbusfranklincountycoc.org/>.



repetitive (e.g., needing to complete similar forms multiple times). There is an opportunity for CSB, the CoC, and community partners to implement a range of strategies to better engage people with lived experience and create a homelessness response system that equitably represents the community.

During interviews with Steering Committee members, some raised the issue of pay equity for people working in the homelessness response system. Frontline staff may not be paid a living wage at all organizations and may be at risk themselves of losing their housing. Individuals who lead provider organizations noted frontline workers, as compared to management and executive staff, are disproportionately women of color. As a result, pay equity in the homelessness response system is a matter of racial and gender equity.

Assessment findings also indicate data can be better geared toward learning. CSB has been a national leader in collecting and reporting data. As the homelessness response field started emphasizing performance management and data-driven decision-making as effective practices, CSB was often looked to as a model. CSB has sustained their commitment to compiling and publishing system data. Community members and stakeholders can find a wealth of data and reports easily accessible on CSB's website, including monthly occupancy reports, system indicator reports, Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) impact reports, comparison reports using national and local Point-in-Time and system data, program evaluation reports, organizational annual reports, and an interactive data dashboard.

Despite the volume and nature of data published, the data reports available do not foster engagement and facilitate learning. The number of reports available and volume of content in each report can be overwhelming for a community member or stakeholder to locate information or understand what the results mean and how the information relates to system improvement efforts or targets. In addition, many reports are packed with quantitative data but lack qualitative data, particularly feedback from people accessing the homelessness response system that could be used to better understand program and system performance. Finally, some data points are not reported or visualized so the reader can easily understand the outputs and outcomes of the system.

For example, if a community member wanted to understand how well the homelessness response system is serving Black residents, they may turn to the System Performance Indicator Report (SPIR). The SPIR reports select outcomes for different demographic groups (e.g., 59% of Black households successfully exited from shelter). However, the report does not include a



comparable demographic breakdown for participants. Without this information, it is impossible to understand how big of a population that 59% success rate applies to. The information may be provided elsewhere, but the reader must gather information from various reports to begin to understand how well the homelessness response system is serving Black residents.

Some modifications to data reports have been made to be more digestible and engaging for readers, and CSB has started investing in program evaluations to measure program efficacy and identify opportunities for improvement. These are positive steps, and additional modifications to current reporting practices can ensure data collected, analyzed, and published encourages learning and can inform decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE SYSTEM CHANGE

Recommendations included in this section are informed by the system modeling projections and system findings. As discussed earlier, the baseline model projects growth in homelessness, including a 68% increase in unsheltered homelessness if the community continues on its current path. An iterative process was used to develop the future state model informed by local data and best practices, feedback from the Assessment Steering Committee, and input from hundreds of community stakeholders engaged through interviews, focus groups, and surveys.³⁶ The future state modeling process built on the baseline model to project the impacts of making changes in program capacity and program outcomes for prevention and diversion, shelter, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing programs. Changing any of these system components can have impact, but transformation requires coordinated adjustments across multiple components of the homelessness response system. The future state modeling targets for system capacity and performance are summarized in Table 2.

³⁶ Additional information on the models developed for the Assessment are included in the Technical Report.



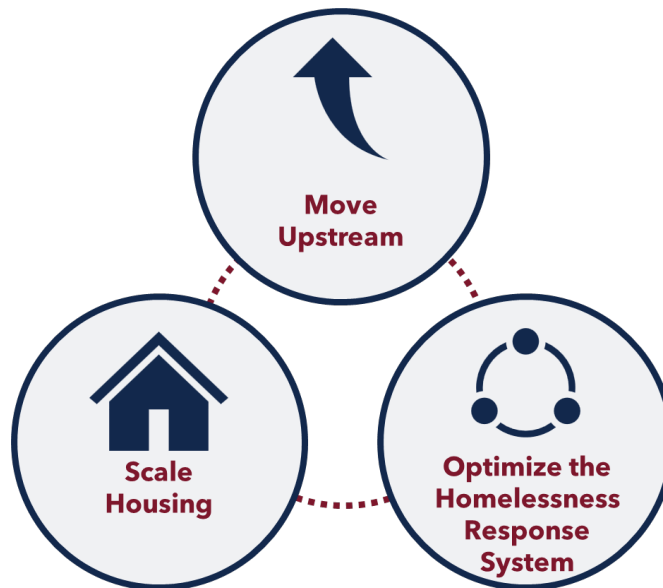
Table 2. Future State Modeling Targets

Move Upstream	Divert at least 25% of single adult households per year from further services within the homelessness response system
Optimize the System	Move to non-congregate shelter options for families and repurpose existing semi-congregate spaces
	Achieve an average length of time for a discrete stay in shelter of 30 days
	Increase the percentage of single adults accessing permanent housing from shelter to 25%
	Increase utilization rates for rapid rehousing to at least 90%
	Extend the average length of stay in rapid rehousing to 12 months
Scale Housing	Add at least 250 slots of rapid rehousing for single adults over a five-year period
	Add at least 375 units of permanent supportive housing for single adults over a five-year period

Recommendations reflect changes in capacity and performance in the homelessness response system that can result in reductions in rates of homelessness from the baseline model, improve the efficacy of the homelessness response system, advance equity, and ensure the homelessness response system’s design and implementation is grounded in and responsive to the community. They include strategies to realize the community’s desired future state, organized around moving upstream, optimizing the performance and outcomes of the system, scaling permanent housing options, and expanding practices of continuous learning, engagement with the community, and exploring opportunities to improve equity (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Diagram of Recommendations



A. Move Upstream



Recommendation 1: *Implement evidence-based diversion practices for single adults, to divert at least 25% of households per year from further services within the homelessness response system*

Thousands of households each year enter the homelessness response system. One of the most efficient methods to reduce homelessness is ensuring fewer people become homeless and access the homelessness response system. Diversion is an evidence-based practice that involves supporting households seeking shelter or assistance from the homelessness response system to find safe alternatives to shelter to resolve their housing crisis. Resolutions often include one-time financial assistance for deposits, rental arrears, or moving expenses. If a household is staying with friends or family members, financial assistance can be used to pay for groceries, gas, or a share of utilities to help and incentivize the host household.

The current system includes multiple opportunities to divert families; comparable opportunities for single adults do not exist. To decrease the rate of homelessness overall, robust diversion is needed to decrease inflow into the homelessness response system. It is



recommended the system implement evidence-based diversion practices, specifically for single adults.

In addition to implementing robust diversion, many households experiencing homelessness do not require long-term supportive services to gain and retain housing. These households could benefit from a rapid exit strategy. Rapid exit operates similarly to diversion but focuses on people already staying in shelters or staying outside in unsheltered locations. Providing housing-focused services and short-term financial assistance can be enough for many households to resolve their own homelessness. Both families and single adults can benefit from diversion and rapid exit strategies. To scale the homelessness response system to meet current needs, implementing these strategies specifically for single adults is needed.

Recommendation 2: *Use underutilized Direct Client Assistance funds to support additional diversion and to expand rapid exit strategies for single adults*

One possible source of funding to expand diversion and rapid exit strategies is the Direct Client Assistance (DCA) program. DCA funds have been underspent. Redirecting any flexible DCA funds for diversion and rapid exit, particularly for single adults, can fill a gap in the system and ensure resources are fully utilized. This may require updating program guidelines for DCA assistance by expanding the allowable costs to include items like grocery cards or minor home repairs for a host household. In addition, this requires lowering requirements for accessing funds including removing the program requirement that households must demonstrate they can sustain housing once assistance ends. Some people may not be able to identify a clear path to sustain housing while they are searching, but once in housing they find a way to continue to pay for their housing expenses.

B. Optimize the System



System optimization involves improving performance and outcomes of the system. These changes can increase the number of people served and supported to move back into permanent housing by improving the flow through the system, ensuring that if people must stay in shelter those stays are short and people are connected quickly to permanent housing. Recommendations focus on opportunities to optimize system performance and outcomes in shelter and rapid rehousing.



Optimize the Shelter System

Recommendation 3: *Achieve an average length of time for a discrete stay in shelter of 30 days and improve the proportion of single adults accessing permanent housing from shelter to 25%*

Improving performance of shelters requires achieving an average length of a discrete stay of 30 days for all households.³⁷ This would be achieved by implementing strategies to help people in shelters move quickly out of shelter and into permanent housing. This should be treated as an average and not a limit; some people may require more time in shelters, and stays should not be capped.

A 30-day average length of a discrete stay is an increase of seven days over the current average stay for single adults but is consistent with the goal of increasing exits to permanent housing by ensuring people in shelter have time to be supported to access and move into permanent housing. The average length of stay for families is based on estimates developed by staff from CSB as part of a 2024 funding request to the City of Columbus and Franklin County and reflect a gradual reduction from 75 days to 30 days by Year 5 of the model. To complement this length of stay target, shelter providers should also aim for at least 25% of single adults accessing shelter to exit the shelter into permanent housing. Combined, these recommended performance targets reflect a shelter model in which households have safe places to stay temporarily and are able to move relatively quickly out of shelter and into permanent housing, ensuring available shelter units can turnover for the next household in need.

Recommendation 4: *Move to non-congregate shelter options for families, using motels and hotels, and repurpose existing semi-congregate spaces to shelter couples, LGBTQ+, and other vulnerable individuals*

³⁷ CSB's published reports define the average length of shelter stay as the average cumulative days of shelter usage by unduplicated households. This means that all days for people with multiple stays in shelter are included in the numerator, while each household is only included once in the denominator. In effect, this is the average number of days households were engaged with any shelter during the period, rather than the average length of each separate enrollment (or stay) as is more typically used in the field. For the purposes of this report, we use the term "average length of a stay in shelter" where relevant for clarity for local readers.



Optimizing the shelter system also includes ensuring shelter options are safe and accessible to a diverse population. The desire for safe shelter was expressed by people experiencing homelessness engaged during the Assessment. Expanding shelter options to include non-congregate and semi-congregate spaces can better meet varied community preferences.

Making these changes to shelter configurations will result in a temporary increase in shelter capacity while the system scales permanent housing options. Over time, the system can reduce shelter capacity for families while also reducing rates of homelessness because of corresponding investments upstream and in permanent housing.

Recommendation 5: Identify replacement funds for expiring and one-time shelter funding

An optimized homelessness response system requires ensuring the system can operate at its existing capacity and scale to meet the current and future needs of the community. The homelessness response system, and the shelter system specifically, is relying on one-time funding to maintain current operations. It is recommended community funders identify sustainable, reliable funding to ensure the current shelter capacity is retained and to prevent disruptions to services while working to scale the homelessness response system.

Optimize the Permanent Housing System

CSB providers and staff state that as rents have increased, it has become more difficult for housing programs relying on the private rental market, including rapid rehousing and scattered site permanent supportive housing, to support people to access and retain housing. This is a common experience across the country as rental markets have gotten more expensive and vacancy rates have continued to tighten. To improve program performance to the degree needed to achieve the outcomes illustrated in the future state model, program models must be calibrated to housing market conditions. This includes updating strategies for housing subsidies, including extending the duration of the subsidy available and developing shallow subsidies that can be added after rapid rehousing (RRH) is over for some households.

Recommendation 6: Improve performance of rapid rehousing including increasing utilization rates to at least 90%, extending the average length of stay to 12 months, and improving the percentage of households who exit the program to permanent housing to 80%



Households in time-limited subsidy programs are requiring more time to stabilize in housing and increase their income to assume full responsibility for rental expenses. In addition, providing longer term subsidies may encourage more landlords to rent to households using temporary rental assistance because payment over a longer period of time is assured. The future state model calls for encouraging longer lengths of stay in rapid rehousing programs overall, with an average length of stay of 12 months. Some households may require less support, and others will require more than 12 months of support. Extending the potential duration of these subsidies may improve households' opportunities for success and improve program outcomes.

To complement changes in the length of stay in RRH programs, it is recommended to increase utilization rates of RRH to at least 90% and improve exits from RRH to at least 80%. These performance standards align with nationally-adopted best practices.

Recommendation 7: Implement shallow subsidies

Given rising housing costs and the lack of dedicated affordable units, some households may require longer-term financial support to retain housing. Shallow subsidies refer to subsidies that are generally either a fixed monthly amount or cover a percentage of the rent. These are compared to "deep" subsidies that are associated with programs like the Housing Choice Voucher program in which households pay a percentage of their income toward rent and the program pays the difference. Deep subsidies usually provide more financial assistance than shallow ones and change as a household's income changes, while shallow subsidies tend to be smaller and do not change with income. Shallow subsidies can be provided for a defined or indefinite length of time. A shallow subsidy program can be used by households requiring less subsidy to maintain their housing and can be used as a step-down from rapid rehousing programs.

Recommendation 8: Increase landlord engagement strategies

To achieve the performance outcomes included in the predictive model, strong partnerships with landlords are needed. Increasing participation of landlords may require increasing incentives and expanding risk mitigation funds available to landlords to repair units from damage and wear. Adjustments to landlord engagement strategies should be sized to the housing market, with deeper incentives required for a market that is more expensive with fewer vacancies. CSB is actively working to respond to landlord concerns, including by



developing a training for tenants to promote timely communication, as landlords have suggested. Building on these efforts to implement strategies to respond to landlord needs can strengthen the system’s ability to recruit and retain landlords. As with other recommended strategies, landlord engagement strategies should be regularly assessed and adjusted to ensure the types and size of incentives provided to landlords are calibrated to the housing market and are contributing to improved program outcomes.

C. Scale Housing



Recommendation 9: Add at least 250 slots of rapid rehousing over a five-year period

Recommendation 10: Add at least 375 units of permanent supportive housing over a five-year period

Sufficient permanent housing resources are needed for people to move out of homelessness. This includes rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing. As rapid rehousing turns over more frequently, scaling rapid rehousing will help ensure there is more continuous flow through the homelessness response system. Scaling permanent supportive housing contributes to community-wide efforts to increase the supply of affordable housing as each unit is typically restricted as deeply affordable for at least 20 years. Adding these resources for single adults will help scale the system to more closely match current and anticipated needs.

Recommendation 11: Over time, shift the resource strategy to invest more heavily in permanent housing solutions

Adding the new units of housing recommended above will help shift the focus of the system to invest more heavily in permanent housing strategies. Over time, the community should maintain a commitment to investing in permanent housing options to yield desired outcomes.

Recommendation 12: Leverage the benefits of having a Unified Funding Agency

To ensure an efficient and coordinated effort to scale the system, community partners should leverage the benefits of having a Unified Funding Agency, and recommit to a centralized, focused approach in which local and federal funds are invested under local control to achieve local goals. Using CSB to channel new and existing resources, report results, and be held



accountable for scaling the system as the community grows can aid the community to strategically and collaboratively invest in the interventions needed to reach community targets.

D. Enhance Equity, Learning, and Engagement



Recommendations to enhance equity, learning, and engagement focus on engaging people with lived experience in system design and implementation, implementing strategies to advance equity, and restructuring data reporting to promote continuous system improvement.

Recommendation 13: *Engage a diverse group of people with lived experience in the design and implementation of system components, processes, and procedures*

As previously described, the homelessness response system has some opportunities for people with lived experience of homelessness to inform decision-making. One of the first findings from the Assessment was a recognition the system is not regularly providing opportunities for communities disproportionately impacted by homelessness and people with lived experience of homelessness to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the homelessness response system. This finding led to CSB revising the scope of the Assessment to integrate more opportunities to engage the community. While the engagement activities completed as part of the Assessment are a good step, regular and authentic engagement is needed as a core element of system decision making. Including these perspectives can help the homelessness response system identify how to streamline and improve system practices and processes to make the system easier to navigate, more responsive to community needs, and more efficient.

Communities across the country are exploring different strategies to engage people with lived experience of homelessness. Examples include developing employment pathways and creating incentives to hire people with lived experience of homelessness who may require additional training to develop other job skills; restructuring processes for developing policies and procedures so people with lived experience are involved early in the process; and hiring people with lived experience as consultants to liaise with other people experiencing homelessness, allowing the organization to bring more people into community processes. CSB should examine the participation rates and the efficacy of its currently available



engagement opportunities and begin implementing other strategies as needed to achieve robust participation.

Recommendation 14: *Examine workforce pay practices and identify strategies to improve pay equity*

During the Assessment process, Steering Committee members expressed concern that frontline workers in the homelessness response system may not make a living wage. In addition, frontline staff are often women of color, making pay equity a matter of race and gender equity. Additional exploration is needed to understand the extent of pay equity issues in the homelessness response system, with the goal of implementing strategies to improve pay equity and build a more stable workforce.

Recommendation 15: *Restructure data reporting and evaluations to reflect the information needed to drive system and program improvements*

Using data effectively requires reporting metrics and findings from evaluations in a manner that is easy to digest and directs the reader to identify areas of potential growth or opportunity. CSB has a long-established commitment to collecting and reporting on outcomes. Two recommendations to begin improving data reporting with the goals of learning and system improvement involve:

- 1) integrating qualitative data, and;
- 2) reporting metrics in ways that more clearly demonstrate disparities and inequities in the system.

Current reporting focuses on quantitative analysis but lacks perspectives from people enrolled in programs and accessing services through the homelessness response system. Qualitative input, including the impact of current practices on individuals and families is critical to identify needed program and system improvements. An effort to expand reporting in this way is consistent with the recommendation regarding better engaging people with lived experience in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the system.

In addition, data on outcomes for different demographic groups is not presented in a way that is easily interpretable. Community leaders have expressed a desire to create a community that is equitable. Understanding inequities in the homelessness response system from different



angles is needed to develop strategies that can advance equity and contribute to this important community goal. Reporting demographic breakdowns across metrics will provide more useful information about where the system may be reducing disparities and where inequities may currently be exacerbated.

Along with improvements to regular reporting structures, periodic evaluations of system programs and components can allow CSB, providers, and stakeholders to analyze each program type or system component in greater detail and identify modifications to achieve outcome goals and meet the needs of the community. As pointed out in this assessment, local program models and system components have continued to operate without much change, though housing market conditions and national best practices have shifted in some areas. Regular, robust evaluation can identify areas in need of improvement earlier. With each modification, the system should continuously monitor, evaluate, and assess what further adjustments are needed to optimize the system. By going through this process, the system can adopt a culture of learning that is grounded in action. Funder expectations and resources for evaluation do not appear to be in place currently but will be needed to successfully scale.

OUTCOMES AND COSTS OF SYSTEM CHANGES

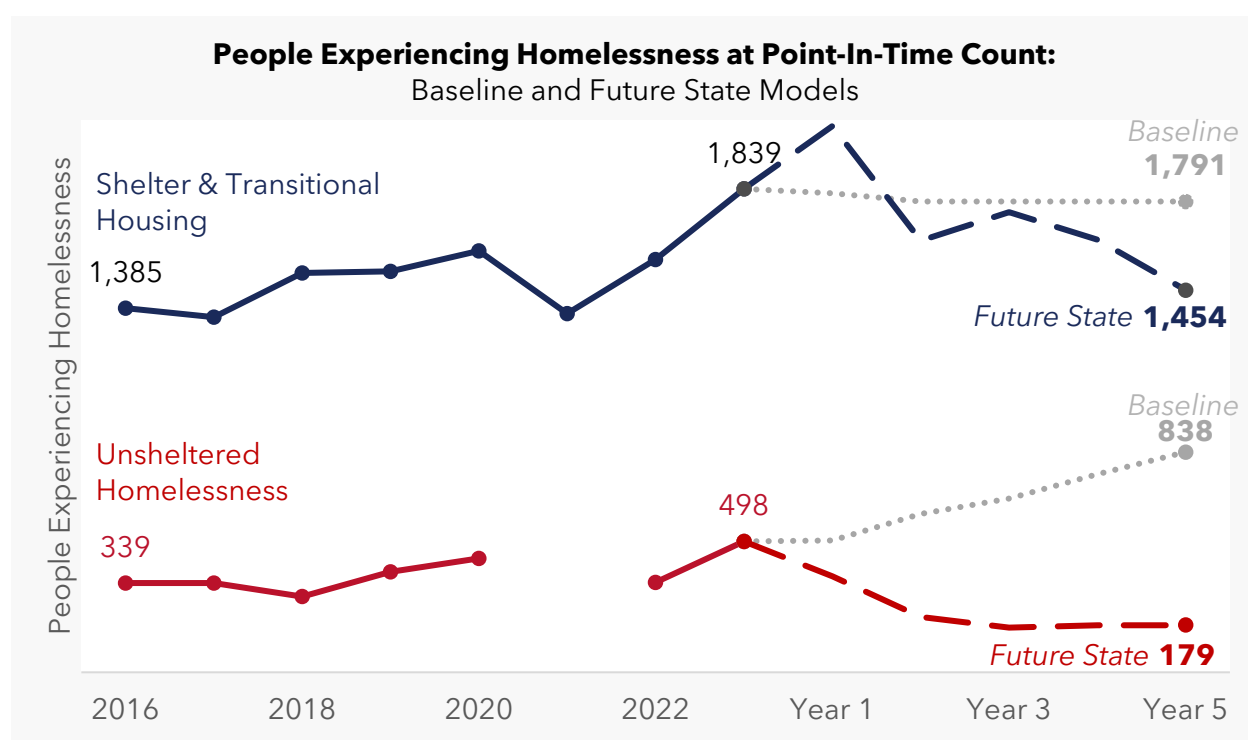
The ambitious changes described in the previous section can deliver high impact results compared to the current path. As illustrated in Figure 5, these combined actions could result in the following impacts³⁸ after five years compared to the baseline:

- 38% decrease in total homelessness (about 1,000 fewer people)
- 79% decrease in unsheltered adults
- 44% decrease in sheltered families

³⁸ Predictive modeling cannot predict the future. There is an element of mathematical uncertainty when modeling as many factors impacting rates of homelessness cannot be perfectly predicted and cannot be controlled.



Figure 5. Future State Model



Implementing these system changes will require approximately \$137million in one-time development capital costs and about \$21 million in *new* annual operating and services resources beyond current system resources.³⁹ In addition, it is important to note that Columbus and Franklin County, like most communities in the country, are currently using COVID-19 related funding sources to fund core homeless system operations, such as emergency shelter. Those funds expire in 2026 and there are no additional federal resources anticipated to fill those gaps. The recommendations in the Assessment require additional resources beyond the currently funded level. In other words, to reduce homelessness over the coming years, funding currently provided by COVID-19 related resources will have to be replaced, as well as significant additional resources committed to homelessness prevention/diversion, system updates and improvements, and housing and related services costs. Implementation of the recommended system changes to achieve these targets will require a coordinated funding strategy, with commitment from the City of Columbus, Franklin County, the private sector, CSB, and other community funders and partners.

³⁹ Additional information on the costs to implement the recommended predictive model, including breakdowns by system component per year, are included in the Technical Report.



Besides the direct investments in new or expanded interventions, successfully transforming the system will require additional resources to support change initiatives. Examples of these costs include:

- Investment in procurement processes, system capacity building, training for staff, and technical assistance to implement recommended strategies
- Modifications to operations of other system components including street outreach, coordinated entry and the Homeless Hotline, and the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)
- Cost of living adjustments
- Costs of conducting regular program and system evaluations
- Costs to engage in a continuous learning process to assess the impact and success of implemented system changes

NEXT STEPS

This Assessment is an initial step in the process of scaling the community system to better respond to homelessness. System improvements can be made with existing resources in some cases, but significant additional resources are needed to scale the homelessness response system. CSB, with support from local funders, can start this work, taking initial steps to align efforts and progress with community goals.

Achieving the vision of wellbeing for all and avoiding “big city problems” as the community grows requires scaling systems and infrastructure, such as transportation, anti-poverty systems and programs, and removing barriers to housing development, and connecting progress to those larger

“We don’t want the stories that are told about [other cities], about their growth trajectories that have also had this tough underbelly of poverty. We don’t want that story told about us.”

- Steering Committee member

community goals. The homelessness response system can advance community-wide goals by accurately evaluating work and measuring progress, refining communication strategies to inform leaders and stakeholders of results and future plans, and creating space in all activities to understand and articulate how efforts to reduce homelessness are serving larger community efforts. Through this process, the homelessness response system can promote community wellbeing and fairness for all and contribute to the community vision.



Success requires the community to adopt a bias toward action. As stated previously, this community has invested in extensive reports, analyses, and plans about homelessness and related issues, but implementation appears to occur slowly. Committing to quickly determining the initial steps needed to implement recommendations may be helpful, including:

- Deciding who the decision-makers are and what is needed to achieve a commitment to moving forward
- Identifying any endorsement or adoption process that would allow implementation to move forward
- Deciding what the accountability and reporting mechanisms will be

Moving swiftly to put in place decision making structures and expectations will help Columbus and Franklin County leadership implement the recommendations to meet current challenges and prepare for anticipated, growing needs.



APPENDIX: STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Barabara Benham, Huntington

Carlie Boos, Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio

Susan Carroll-Boser, White Castle

Elizabeth Brown, YWCA Columbus

Tony Collins, YMCA of Central Ohio

Lisa Courtice, United Way of Central Ohio

The Honorable Erica Crawley, Franklin County Board of Commissioners

The Honorable Shannon Hardin, Columbus City Council

Stephanie Hightower, Columbus Urban League

Shannon TL Isom, Community Shelter Board

Chad Jester, Nationwide

Erika Clark Jones, ADAMH

Rachel Lustig, Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio

Jeff Polesovsky, Columbus Partnership

Sheila Prillerman, Retired Veteran and Homeless Advocate

Sherrice Sledge-Thomas,⁴⁰ Columbus Chamber of Commerce

Michael Stevens, City of Columbus

Sonya Thesing, Huckleberry House

Kenneth Wilson, Franklin County Board of Commissioners

⁴⁰ Sherrice Sledge-Thomas served on the Assessment Steering Committee in her role of Vice-President of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access for the Columbus Chamber of Commerce. She transitioned into the role of Chief People + Culture Officer at Community Shelter Board in 2024.

