



Cathy Barsema, Director of Guest Services, shows the secure personal space at Carpenter's Place to store belongings for those experiencing homelessness.

**GREATER ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS**

# Working relentlessly together on shared goals and best practices

Having functionally ending Veteran and chronic homelessness, the Greater Rockford area has been lauded with federal and national recognition. The current Rockford mayor, Thomas McNamara, credits success to the talented city staff who work closely with a network of strong community nonprofit organizations—as well as an understanding by police that the goal is to help, not arrest, people.

## HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

Rockford attributes its successes to adopting a Housing First approach, where priority is given to providing people with permanent housing as quickly and directly as possible.

**A**djacent to and northwest of Chicago, the metro area of Greater Rockford has a population of 337,715 and straddles across Winnebago and Boone Counties. Originally based on agricultural and industrial sectors, Rockford's economy was hit hard by the recession of 2008 and is still dealing with the economic repercussions today. At \$21,615, the average annual income of a Rockford resident is lower than the national average of \$28,555. Rockford's rents are relatively low at \$715 per month.

Greater Rockford has seen substantial reductions in homelessness. The total unsheltered population has numbered under fifty in recent years. The City of Rockford's Community Services Division provides leadership and staff support for the local homeless services Continuum of Care (CoC), which participates in Community Solution's Built for Zero initiative.

### Rockford's goal: end all homelessness by 2020

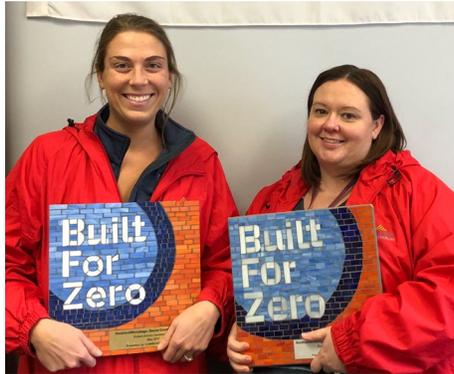
Rockford's adoption of a Housing First approach was central to their success. Any person experiencing homelessness is tracked on a "by-name" list or "active list," which facilitates interagency collaboration to provide access to housing and services. Rockford's goal is to end all homelessness by 2020 by individually focusing on the needs of subpopulations identified in their active list.

## SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION MILESTONES

- > A 2014 resolution to be a Housing First community was affirmed by Rockford's Mayor in a State of the City address.
- > The CoC joined the national Community Solutions' Built for Zero initiative in late 2014.
- > Rockford was recognized for achieving functional end to Veteran homelessness in December 2015 and chronic homelessness in October 2017.

**“We have been able to make an offer of housing, not just emergency shelter, during outreach. Because we are able to deliver on this promise, we now have “street cred.” People on the streets need to see that help is real since too often in the past promises were broken.”**

*Angie Walker, City of Rockford*



City of Rockford staff show off their Built for Zero awards from Community Solutions in recognition of ending chronic and Veteran homelessness.

Past success has been achieved through the creation of systems that unify crisis response and prioritize housing placement for unsheltered individuals and by fostering partnerships with first responders. Since 2013, there has been a dramatic reduction in the overall and unsheltered homeless population — a reduction that has been maintained to the present.

## INNOVATIVE FEATURE: SYSTEMS THAT UNIFY CRISIS RESPONSE AND PRIORITIZE HOUSING PLACEMENT FOR UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS

A key leadership characteristic in Greater Rockford is the belief that homelessness can be ended, that housing is a basic right, and that no one should be homeless. This common

ground fostered partnerships between homeless services providers, local government, and community partners.

The community has tremendous pride in reaching major milestones that align with the strong value that “homelessness can be ended.” One leader noted that “we were relentless in doing whatever it takes” and the benefits of “friendly competition with other communities,” which included lots of peer-to-peer community sharing.

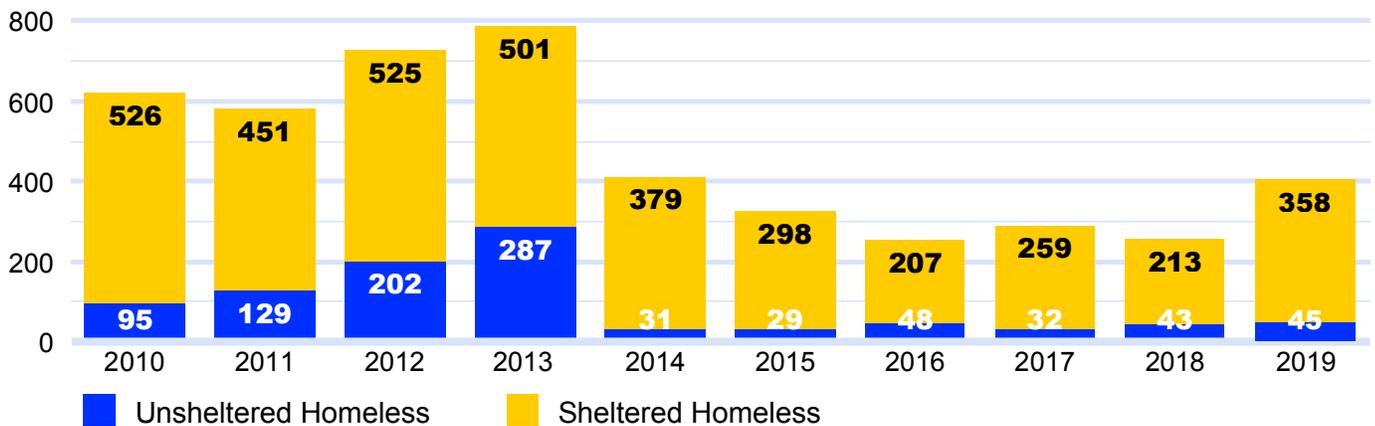
### A local system based on best practices

At the core of Rockford's success is the creation of a local system based on proven best practices that satisfied the federal and Community Solutions' criteria for a functional end to homelessness for Veterans and people who experience chronic homelessness.

The Mayor and the CoC signed on to the federal Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness and Community Solutions' Built for Zero initiatives. Extensive technical assistance from Community Solutions helped the CoC set goals, create a quality by-name list to coordinate monthly case conferencing, and redesign street outreach to actively link persons who were unsheltered to housing.

Rockford's CoC, with support from the local office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, reallocated funding away from transitional housing towards increased permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing capacity. Households with longer homeless tenures and greater vulnerability were prioritized for housing openings. This refocusing helped outreach, shelter, and housing providers be more creative to meet the needs of people who were living unsheltered.

# Greater Rockford, IL Homelessness Trends



System transformation and smart investment decisions have reduced overall and unsheltered homelessness.

Source: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>

The system adopted a ‘diversion first’ approach, providing resources for households facing homelessness or individuals who recently became homeless. The goal of diversion first is to avert unsheltered homelessness, reduce admissions to shelters, and make shelter stays as short as possible.

Improved real-time and comprehensive data sharing was another critical foundation for success in reducing unsheltered homelessness.

These best practices are now being applied to other subpopulations—youth, families, and single adults. Moreover, having created functional crisis response and housing placement systems, the City and the CoC are beginning to explore why single adults become homeless, including the roles of racial disparities and adverse childhood experiences in later adult homelessness.

Another goal is to address risk factors for homelessness among people being served by public systems by, for example, forging partnerships with local hospitals to improve discharge practices.

and ways to de-escalate and resolve conflict. When the Rockford Park Police encounter unsheltered homeless people within the extensive array of parks, rather than arrest or issue a citation, the officer engages the individual to problem solve the situation and connect with the homeless hotline and emergency shelter or housing.

## Homeless hotline

The CoC’s homeless hotline is known as the Single Point of Entry (SPOE). Operating 24/7, the hotline fields calls from the general public, service providers, police, and anyone seeking help who is homeless. Rather than a police response to public concerns about unsheltered homeless situations, calls go to SPOE, where the hotline operator deploys homeless services personnel, including mental health providers.

## Mobile Integrated Healthcare: patient-centered, mobile healthcare

The Rockford Fire Department and EMS recently partnered with the Swedish American Healthcare System to implement Mobile Integrated Healthcare (MIH). MIH is an innovative model that uses patient-centered, mobile resources in out-of-hospital settings. MIH focuses on people with chronic and complex medical conditions who make frequent contact with 911 and the hospital emergency department.

**“Rockford has been on steady 30-year decline, but they don’t use that as an excuse. They are very earnest about wanting to succeed. Compared to many other places with better employment and other economic factors, Rockford providers are really willing to take the hardest serve.”**

*Adam Smith  
Institute for Community Alliances*

## INNOVATIVE FEATURE: FIRST RESPONDER PARTNERSHIPS

First responders, including police and emergency medical services (EMS), are likely to make contact with people who experience homelessness and may be unsheltered. The CoC developed partnerships with first responders to provide a more comprehensive approach to meeting needs of homeless people.

### Training first responders

The CoC staff work closely with local police on training for non-punitive responses to homelessness, how to connect to homeless services, handle situations involving people who are exhibiting symptoms of mental illness,

Often this will include homeless people. A dedicated EMS staff makes healthcare connections, provides health education, and contacts the homeless hotline if lack of housing is an issue. The MIH program receives funding through the local hospital system; all other activities are supported by the respective departments' general operating budgets.

## KEY LESSONS

### Center local homeless services systems on meeting the needs of people

Community consensus on the beliefs that “homelessness is unacceptable” and “ending homelessness is possible” creates a focal point for people to rally around rather than protecting organizational agendas.

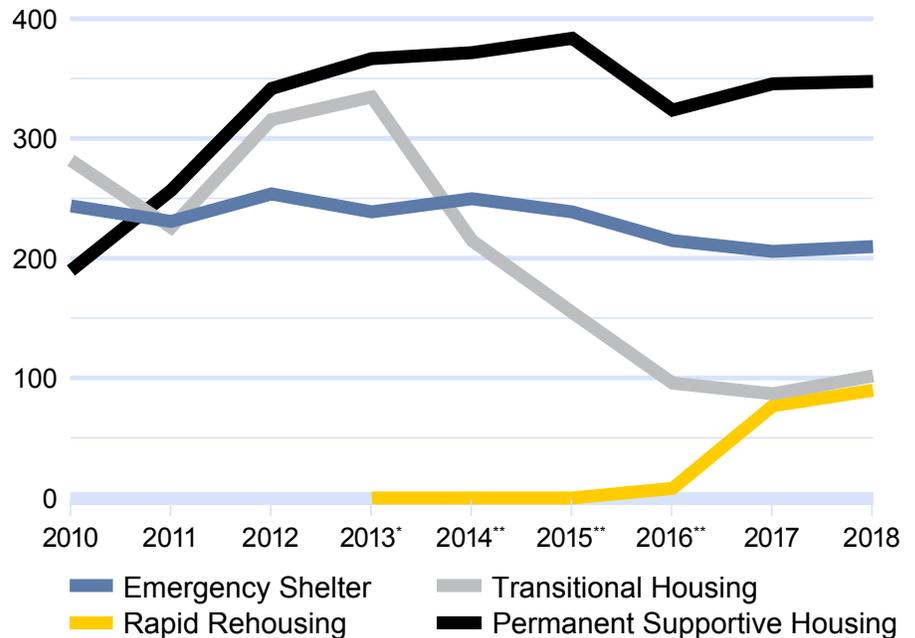
### Embrace a Housing First approach

- Engender the willingness to take on “harder to house” people, including people who have been homeless for long periods of time and/or have behavioral challenges, and take the risks necessary to bring people from unsheltered situations to housing.
- Create systems and processes to support a Housing First approach.
- Top-down leadership and bottom-up commitments to a Housing First approach are required.

### Create more permanent housing options

- Increased availability of permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing resulted in more exits from homelessness and fewer returns to homelessness.
- Be creative in non-traditional access to permanent housing — like shared apartments.
- Facilitating “flow” from permanent supportive housing (PSH) to affordable housing frees up slots in PSH.
- Developing partnerships with the local housing authorities can add additional PSH capacity.

## Greater Rockford, IL Total Year-Round Beds Trends



By increasing permanent and rapid rehousing, Rockford was able to slightly reduce emergency shelter capacity and still reduce unsheltered homelessness.

\* 2013 Counts RRH in Total Year-Round Beds, HMIS Participation, and Total Beds for Households with/without Children.

\*\* 2014-2016 has two types of RRH values: one that includes demonstration programs and one that excludes demonstration programs. The value including demonstration programs was used for Total Year-Round Beds (RRH).

Source: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>

### Use real-time data about who is currently homeless

“Otherwise, you’re always working on an old problem.”

- Using by-name lists and case conferencing keeps the focus on meeting the needs of individuals who need help now. This approach has been more effective than reviewing past data reports to figure out trends.

### Be inclusive

Everyone can have a seat at the table and participate. Rockford has open and inclusive CoC meetings—all types of providers, police and other first responders, faith-based organizations, and local government participate.

### Set goals

- By focusing on population-specific goals, Rockford has been able to test strategies and make adjustments and then apply learnings to the next population.
- Reaching goals also provides markers for celebrating success.

## SOLUTIONS BASED ON EVIDENCE

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropic organization with the mission to invest in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunities and minimize injustice. AV supported a study to identify practices and policies that promote alternatives to using punitive and enforcement-based measures as the primary responses to unsheltered homelessness. Project investigators conducted a three-day visit in spring–summer 2019 to each of nine sites for an in-person review of community-specific initiatives. The sites represent the major regions of the U.S. and include cities of different sizes as well as rural, suburban, and tribal areas and provide an array of different socioeconomic contexts and present different local housing market configurations.