



Tiffani Juarez and Morgan Lara, youth outreach workers

SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA

Rural communities working together to end homelessness

The Southwest region of Minnesota covers 18 counties. It's a large rural area with a combined population of 276,000. The region's rate of overall homelessness has steadily decreased since 2014. In April 2019, Southwest Minnesota received federal recognition for functionally ending chronic homelessness, after functionally ending veteran homelessness in 2017. It's more than just the Minnesotan winters that have curtailed the homelessness numbers. It's been a concerted effort of collaboration.

HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

In Southwest Minnesota priority is given to providing people with permanent housing as quickly and directly as possible.

Homeless services providers are organized as the Southwest Minnesota Continuum of Care (CoC). As a system, they have adopted Housing First practices. The CoC has been successful at garnering new state and federal resources to support the growth in permanent supportive housing since 2011 and the introduction of rapid rehousing in 2014. The collaborative efforts to address chronic homelessness are largely credited with the success in keeping unsheltered homelessness rare. The CoC's most recent public report (October 2017) showed that 76 percent of individuals exited from emergency shelter, safe havens, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing to permanent housing destinations.

week—to afford rent. For example, in Kandiyohi County, Fair Market Rent for a one-bedroom unit is \$737 per month. According to National Low Income Housing Coalition data, at the minimum wage of \$9.86 per hour, a renter household would need to work 57 hours per week to afford that unit; at the estimated mean renter wage of \$10.36 per hour that household would need to work 55 hours per week to afford it.

Due to the huge territory that the CoC covers, the remainder of the street outreach is done by law enforcement. The 18 Sheriff's departments and many municipal police forces are trained by the CoC annually to know where the Coordinated Entry Points are in each county.¹ Agencies responsible for domestic violence and human trafficking programs also provide periodic training for law enforcement to ensure their awareness about victim services and connection to homelessness.

A problem-solving approach is the most frequent response by law enforcement. Many law enforcement agencies collaborate with the Salvation Army to be able to provide emergency hotel vouchers when necessary. Law enforcement is able to respond to unsheltered homelessness emergencies brought to their attention by community members. Enforcement actions, such as arrests, companion, and move along orders, generally only occur with chronically homeless people who are more likely to be unsheltered.

INNOVATIVE FEATURE: APPROACH TO OUTREACH

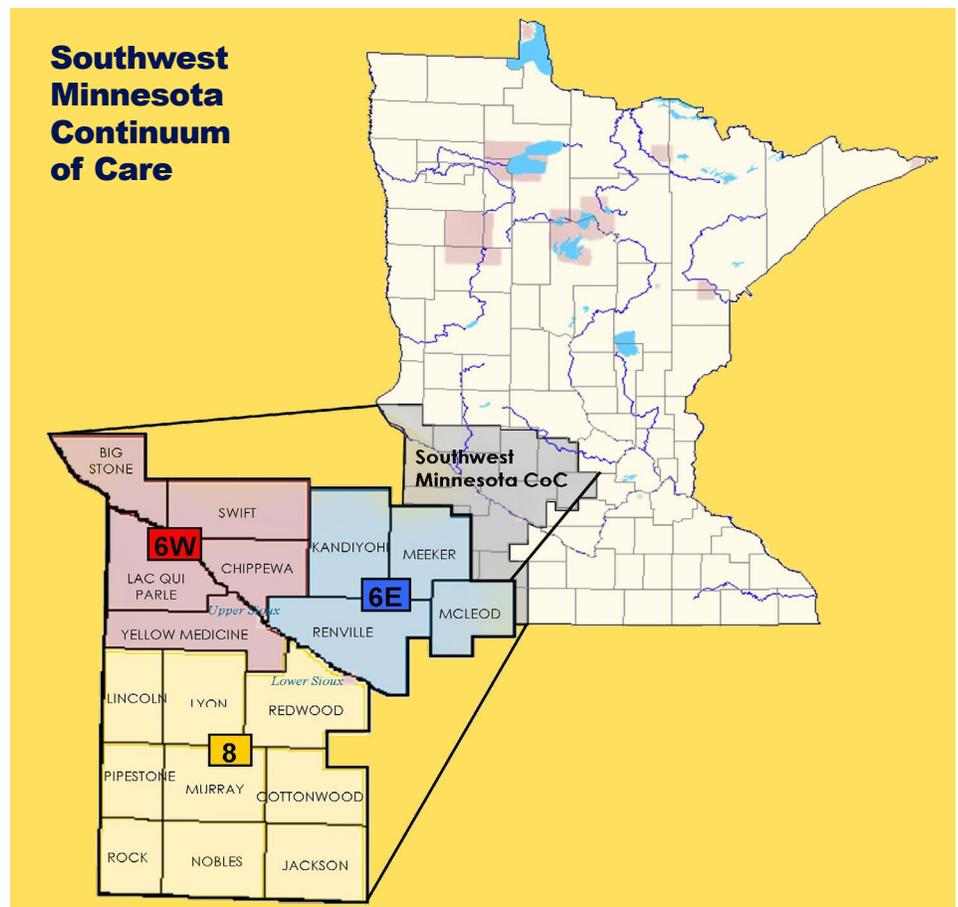
The CoC covers 12,000 square miles. In Willmar, the largest city in the CoC's area, outreach to identify, engage, and screen people for housing/services occurs at least weekly at libraries, schools, parks, and other known locations. Youth outreach services have developed and maintain long-standing relationships with organizations and places that serve youth. A 24/7 hotline with on-call response available Monday–Friday is the backbone for homeless youth services.

KEY MILESTONES IN SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

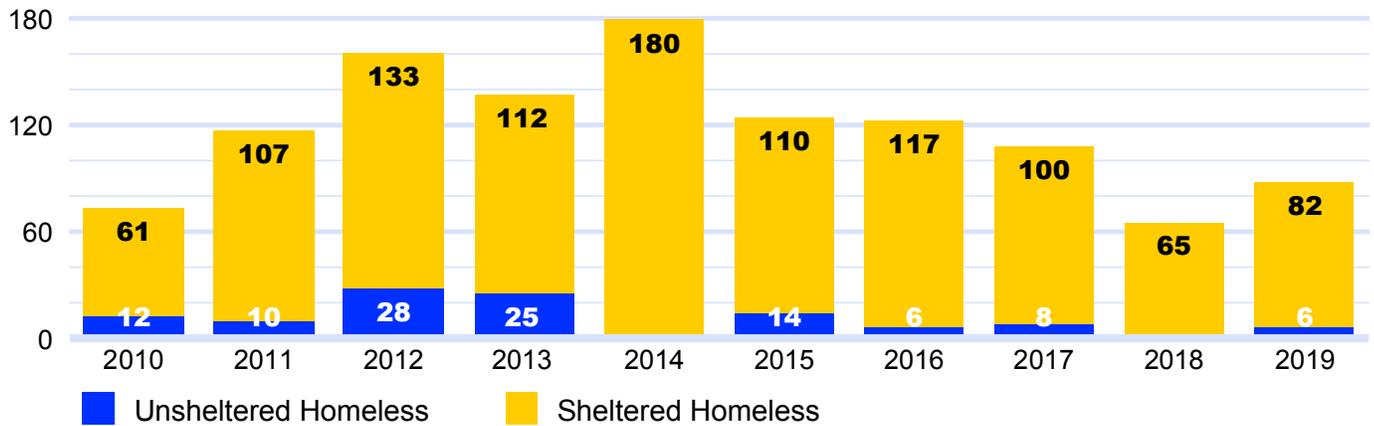
- > Basic Coordinated Entry System (CES), launched 2013
- > Recognized by federal agencies for achieving an end to homelessness among Veterans, February 2017
- > Launched HMIS-based Coordinated Entry System with standardized assessment, 2017
- > Recognized by Federal agencies for achieving an end to chronic homelessness, April 2019

Like many areas throughout the United States, Southwest Minnesota has faced economic challenges. While the state overall is experiencing job growth, the three economic development regions in Southwest Minnesota have job declines. Additionally, the population is declining in this area at a higher rate than anywhere else in the state.

Rental housing is relatively affordable compared to metropolitan areas. However, because the region's incomes are significantly lower than the state's average, minimum wage and estimated mean renter wage renters need to work more than full-time—over 40 hours a



Southwest Minnesota Homelessness Trends



Consistently low levels of unsheltered homelessness as overall homelessness decreases.

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

INNOVATIVE FEATURE:

UNIFIED CRISIS RESPONSE SYSTEM AND HOUSING PLACEMENT SYSTEM OVER LARGE GEOGRAPHIC AREA

A practical “can do” approach and strong relationships across the multi-county region have accelerated progress. Beyond the contracts for funding, the system is generally organized through long-standing, informal relationships. The shared belief that working together can solve homelessness drives housing and services providers to push themselves and their community partners to act with urgency.

A full array of private and governmental sources is used to support the crisis response system and housing placement system. These include federal and state resources targeted to homelessness and other resources that target low-income households (e.g., Community Services Block Grant). The Southwest Initiative Foundation and the National Association of Realtors have been private contributors to the CoC’s efforts.

Coordinated Collaboration

There is a strong collaboration across the multiple nonprofit and government agencies that actively participate in case conferencing and housing placement. The CoC coordinates much of this collaboration.

The CoC staff members who are charged with addressing homelessness pro-actively engage with police and sheriff’s departments, as well as the local healthcare, criminal justice, and child welfare systems.

The CoC administers the region’s Coordinated Entry System (CES), which is the initial point of contact for those seeking temporary or permanent housing services. The CES consists of multiple access points, including a 211 community resources helpline staffed 24 hours a day. Operators direct callers to the intake point for their county based on their specific situation, including those who are facing homelessness, foreclosure, or imminent homelessness due to domestic violence. CES prioritizes access to rapid rehousing, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing.

Prevention & Assistance

Prevention and assistance resources are placed within each coordinated entry point, and a common diversion/ problem-solving and prevention assessment is used. Law enforcement, schools, workforce centers, and community programs direct individuals at risk to the CoC’s Coordinated Entry intake points, so homelessness is prevented when possible.

A range of emergency sheltering options is available across the region. Each community’s custom approach has been developed to be most effective given the local needs and resources in a strong public-private funding model.

Emergency Shelter

- > Most options are low-barrier motel vouchers for brief stays— typically one to a few days
- > Family Promise—rotating churches for overnight shelter with day center
- > Motel and apartment rentals that can provide longer-term stays— typically a week to a month
- > Single-family home that will be able to be used as a shelter (upcoming)

KEY LESSONS

Be inclusive and collaborate

- Encourage all types of providers, faith-based organizations, and local government to participate in the CoC.
- Make communication a standard practice.
- Develop and maintain relationships with schools, law enforcement, churches, and county agencies, as well as across provider partners.

Be creative and support local approaches

- Support holistic, problem-solving approaches to meet needs within each community.
- Recognize that best approaches will not be the same for every place since each area has different types of facilities that can be used (e.g., motels or church buildings) and varying needs.
- Create partnerships and solutions at the community level through collaboration, which also increases awareness of how to access housing and other resources through the CoC.

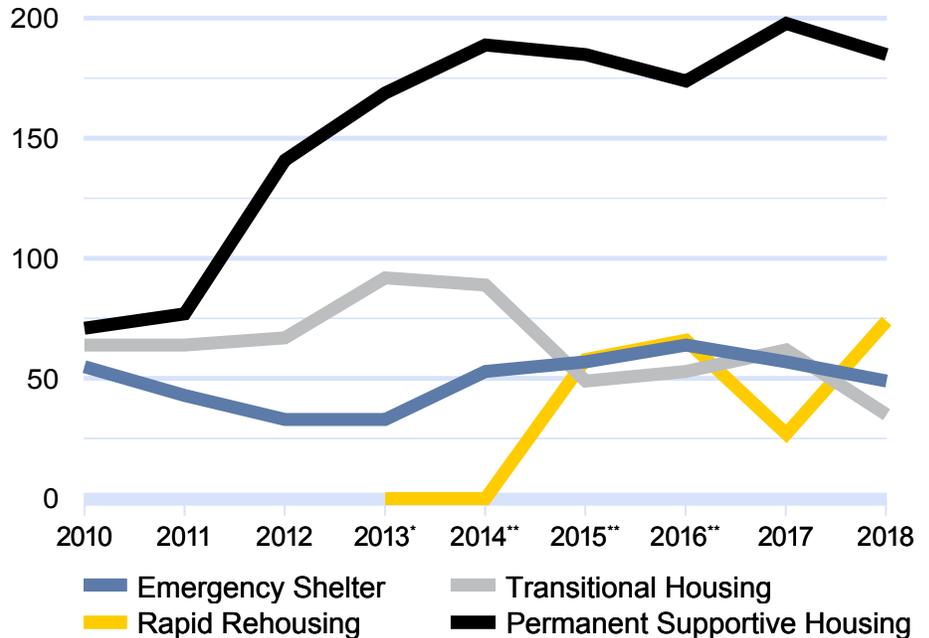
Share resources

- Invite people to rally together and focus on helping people rather than protecting organizational agendas.
- Create a clear understanding of what each agency brings to the table.
- Focus on solutions and share resources.

Embrace Housing First approaches and use the federal benchmarks

- Support each other to embrace those who are “harder to house,” including people who have been homeless for long periods of time and/or have behavioral challenges.
- Take risks necessary to bring people from unsheltered situations into housing.
- Create systems and processes to meet federal benchmarks and criteria.

Southwest Minnesota Total Year-Round Beds Trends



Strong growth in permanent housing options keeps emergency shelter inventory from needing to grow.

* 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/>

Be resourceful to meet youth needs

Many youths are precariously housed with limited access to good role models and family supports so flexible supports that are trauma-informed are needed.

- Build trusting relationships with youth.
- Engage homeless youth over time into services and housing with lots of “hand-holding.”

Educate the public about homelessness

A recent example was the production of four live performances of “The Prairie Homelessness Companion” in the CoC’s four largest cities, an original piece that provided humorous satire with a serious look at housing instability in Southwest Minnesota. Over 300 community members saw the show.

- Create community awareness about why homelessness happens and how it can be solved

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.

1 Law enforcement is advised to use this resource, which shows all coordinated entry points: www.swmnhousinghelp.org