**CoC FL-503**
**Lakeland, Winter Haven/Polk County**
**Continuum of Care Homeless Coalition of Polk County**

**CoC Plan for Serving Individuals and Families Experiencing Homelessness**
**with Severe Service Needs**

Approved: August 2022

**Plan of Action to Address Individuals and Families Experiencing Homelessness
with Severe Service Needs**

In 2020, Homeless Continuums of Care reported that there were 580,466 homeless people in the United States. Florida homelessness is third in the nation, behind California and New York, reporting 27,487 homeless people and is currently facing a severe affordable housing crisis. 12,672 were unsheltered and 14,815 were sheltered. The individuals experiencing homelessness include 5,182 (19%) long-term homeless with a disabling condition (chronic); 4,637 (17%) children under 18; 2,436 (9%) Veterans (between 2015 and 2019), and 1,588 (6%) Youth aged 18-24. The Florida Department of Education reported that there were 79,949 homeless children attending public schools as of September 2020.

As rents continue to rise, individuals that have become homeless cannot quickly find housing they can afford. Families and individuals can experience homelessness for many reasons, but moving them back into housing is the first step in solving any problem that caused their homelessness. Affordable housing and supportive services are needed to address the issue of homelessness.

How we work and with whom we engage, and partner can be as important as what we do. Our processes and partnerships impact not only what housing is built, but also where it is built, for whom, and who benefits from the work. Housing is the foundation for success, and with the collaboration between individuals, the community, and partners, safe affordable housing can be created and preserved. By working together to make transformative changes a reality in Polk County, the issue of homeless can and will be solved, ensuring that everyone has a place to call home. The Homeless Coalition of Polk County, Inc. is dedicated to supporting our provider agencies in meeting their goals, as well as fostering collaborative relationships between agencies and promoting maximization of resources, thereby increasing the number of individuals and families served in Polk County.

To best support our community and address the issue of homelessness, the Lakeland, Winter Haven/ Polk County CoC has implemented the evidence based, proven approach to reducing homelessness, Housing First. Housing First is an approach that prioritizes providing safe, decent, and affordable permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness. It does not have service participation requirements or preconditions to housing. Accordingly, agency staff proactively engage with clients to ensure they are aware of supportive services (e.g., for substance abuse, mental health counseling, job training, etc.), emphasizing client choice in accessing the services.

The Housing First approach has high rates of housing retention, therefore, the CoC regularly provides training to agencies and projects on what Housing First is, why it is important, how it can be implemented. In addition, the CoC regularly evaluates projects for Housing First fidelity, including access, participant input, leases, services, and housing itself. Also, the CoC monitors and analyzes evaluation data to determine which projects may need additional support in implementing Housing First. The use of the Housing First approach, in conjunction with the following goals, objectives, and strategies will aid this CoC's mission to make homelessness rare, non-recurring, and short lived.

Therefore, this plan will outline a strategy to target efforts to reduce unsheltered homeless, particularly in communities with very high levels of unsheltered homelessness, through coordinated approaches, grounded in Housing First and public health principles. We will partner with health and housing agencies to leverage mainstream housing and healthcare

resources to reduce the prevalence of unsheltered homelessness, and improve services engagement, health outcomes, and housing stability among highly vulnerable unsheltered individuals and families.

**Goal 1: Prevent Homelessness Whenever Possible**

The Homeless Coalition of Polk County will be the organization dedicated to the centralization and facilitation activities consistent with section 576.105, housing relocation and stabilization services. The following services and activities will be performed to avoid duplicated or redundant efforts among CDBG/ESG recipients and Continuum of Care members: (1) assessment of housing barriers, needs, and preferences; (2) development of an action plan for locating housing; (3) housing search; (4) outreach to and negotiation with owners; (5) Assistance with submitting rental applications and understanding leases; (6) Assessment of housing for compliance with CDBG/ESG requirements for habitability, lead-based paint, and rent reasonableness. Our goal is to assist 50 clients within the funding year.

The housing search, location, placement, and stabilization functions can best serve the community by taking place at a system level; thereby increasing the ability to invest in targeted outreach to landlords in higher opportunity areas (e.g. low crime rate, low poverty concentrations, transit- oriented developments, etc.) to encourage greater mobility and housing choice.

Landlords are extremely critical partners in the work to address homelessness. Building and maintaining strong relationships between landlords and the homelessness response system is paramount in Polk County given low vacancy rates and the availability of rental units, especially at the lower end of the rent spectrum. These large events bring together community leaders, elected officials, and landlords. They are most effective when landlords can hear from other landlords about their successes partnering to end homelessness. Equally, many landlords, although business oriented, want to be a part of the community's efforts to end homelessness and can be champions when provided accurate information. The landlord engagement event will detail key points of information used increase landlord awareness and cultivate landlord partnerships, that will ultimately result in housing those individuals who are experiencing homelessness.

*Objective 1.1: Ensure Homelessness is a Rare Experience*

The objective will focus on strategies to help make sure that homelessness does not happen nearly as often, including strategies for system-building, increased capacity, and a greater emphasis on diversion strategies and on better preventing housing crisis and homelessness.

- **Strategy 1.1.1: Collaboratively build lasting systems that end homelessness**

This CoC will identify and engage key stakeholders that will develop a shared understanding of why the problem of homelessness persists in Polk County, and then create a shared vision for the future. By learning together and focusing on re-evaluating systems, this CoC and its stakeholders can address and remedy the underlying causes of homelessness in order to both end and prevent it.

- **Strategy 1.1.2: Increase capacity, availability and access to safe, supportive, and permanent housing.**

This CoC has a centralized Housing Navigator to assist all members of the CoC, as well as conduct landlord engagement activities. The Housing Navigator will engage landlords and property owners to identify inventory of housing available for rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing participants. This individual will negotiate to remove barriers to entry, as well as adopt service delivery methods that respond to the preferences and needs of the individual or family presenting for assistance.

- **Strategy 1.1.3: Strengthen practices to prevent housing crisis and homelessness.**

Diversion is an intervention designed to immediately address the needs of someone who has just lost their housing and become homeless. Diversion is a client-driven approach with the goal of helping the person or household find safe alternative housing immediately, rather than entering shelter or experiencing unsheltered homelessness. As this CoC adopts the diversion approach, intended outcomes are to ensure that the homelessness experience is as brief as possible, to prevent unsheltered homelessness, and to avert stays at shelter.

*Objective 1.2: Ensure Homelessness is a Brief Experience*

The objective will emphasize strategies to support comprehensive outreach, low-barrier emergency shelter, strong coordinated entry systems, and swift connections to many different forms of permanent housing – with housing first practices underpinning every element of our response.

- **Strategy 1.2.1: Identify and engage all people experiencing homelessness as quickly as possible.**

The strategic action will include the development and implementation of a clear strategy for street outreach to connect individuals and families directly to rapid rehousing and permanent housing options. This action will be coupled with a front door diversion strategy focused on preventing individuals from entering the homeless system.

- **Strategy 1.2.2: Provide immediate access to low-barrier emergency shelter or other temporary accommodations to all who need it.**

Appropriate staff will engage new community health centers in expanding effective housing models for clients with serious mental health issues, substance abuse disorders, or co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders.

- **Strategy 1.2.3: Enhance coordinated entry to standardize assessment and prioritization processes and streamline connections to housing services.**

The CoC will utilize mainstream resources to identify people experiencing homelessness or at-risk of becoming homeless, coordinate referrals between mainstream resources and the homelessness response, and co-locate services, making critical supports like health and behavioral health care.

- **Strategy 1.2.4: Assist people to move swiftly into permanent housing with appropriate and person-centered services.**

This CoC prioritizes a Housing First approach. We will make every effort to ensure that individuals and families move quickly into permanent housing, without service participation requirements or preconditions. This approach will help projects reduce the length of time people experience homelessness.

*Objective 1.3: Ensure Homelessness is a One-Time Experience*

The objective will focus on helping ensure that people exit to permanent housing stably and successfully.

- **Strategy 1.3.1: Prevent returns to homelessness through connections to adequate services and opportunities.**

    The CoC will strengthen the partnership with local Public Housing Authorities, as well as articulate a clear ask to expand upon the current agreement and collaboration of preferences to serve the chronically homeless and the participation in the emergency housing voucher program. Additionally, the CoC will seek to obtain vouchers from the County to assist individuals and families who are homeless in maintaining permanent housing.

- **Strategy 1.3.2: Expand and enhance wraparound services to increase housing stability and prevent returns to homelessness.**

    The lead agency will develop and implement an internship care management program. The purpose of this program will be to follow-up with clients as their time comes to an end with agency case management, allowing the client to have an additional 6 months of support.

- **Strategy 1.3.3: Sustain practices and systems at a scale necessary to respond to future needs.**

    This strategic action will focus on the development and implementation of a Shared Housing program. We will take a client-centered approach that will include adaptable roommate matching, conflict mediation training, and the capacity to flexibly fund landlord engagement resources.

**Goal 2: Operate an Effective and Efficient Homeless System**

To effectively address homelessness, our CoC must take a coordinated approach, a community-wide response that is strategic and data-driven. This approach includes the use of data to analyze the needs of those experiencing homelessness to inform how to allocate resources, services, and programs. This knowledge will positively impact coordinated entry by helping people move through the system faster to housing, reducing new entries into homelessness by consistently offering prevention and diversion resources upfront, and improving data collection and quality and providing accurate information on what kind of assistance consumers need.

Establishing this plan will help us conceptualize and prioritize our goals and strategies. This plan will also bring providers, government officials, CoC leaders, and funders together to address topics such as how to identify needs of the population, integrate prevention and shelter diversion resources, and sketch out preliminary needs assessment and screening tools. Additionally, advanced data collection and a shared data system will inform decisions, locally and nationally, which is critical to addressing homelessness.

*Objective 2.1: Use data to Drive Continuous Improvement and Systems Learning*

Unsheltered homelessness is continuing to rise in many areas of the country and a recent analysis of homelessness data shows that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness report significantly greater health challenges and experiences of trauma and violence than their unsheltered peers. For this reason, this CoC will make efforts to enhance our Homeless

Management Information System (HMIS) to collect more comprehensive data on people experiencing unsheltered homelessness throughout our geographic area.

- **Strategy 2.1.1: Upgrade and implement new HMIS software to streamline the intake process, create proactive, timely reporting, and ensure more effective tracking outcomes.**

Upgrading HMIS makes it possible for HCPC to offer a more diverse set of program activities to providers and other stakeholders within the CoC. Two critical tasks in this upgrade process include the development of high-quality data and content that can be delivered in a reliable manner, as well a valid and reliable assessment tool that can guide informed decisions that impact care planning, resource allocation, and other services in the most appropriate and effective way. By gathering reliable and timely data, HCPC can use it to facilitate real-time decisions and better understand the challenges we face when aiding those experiencing homelessness or are at-risk of homelessness.

Effective technology plays a vital role in filling the needs of the most vulnerable people in our community. Having up to date software that is adaptable to our needs will provide actionable data to better serve our clients, providers, and community. New technology will identify and track critical needs which will allow us to develop and integrate outcomes that bridge the gap between fragmented and siloed care management, bringing all providers and community resources into a single revolutionized system.

- **Strategy 2.1.2: Review HMIS data quality elements that influence the annual HUD CoC application and proactively alert program funding recipients to needed data quality improvements.**

Having access to up-to-date relevant data allows us the ability to develop a clear communication plan that is essential to organization effectiveness and outreach, i.e., our mission, operating goals, and beliefs. These messages can then be communicated to our local, state, and national government, as well as other philanthropic organizations, and community members. The communication plan will enhance our visibility in the community, county, and region, generate positive attitudes and impressions of our organization, increase awareness of our programs and services, promote a change of attitude among certain members of the community, generate support from public, key policy makers, generate financial support and contributions, and establish and maintain dialogue with our most important stakeholders.

### *Objective 2.2: Develop and Implement a Sustainable Funding Model*

To develop a sustainable funding model, the CoC leadership will confirm budgetary needs and opportunities. The objective will focus on resources, the development of effective non-profit leadership, the reduction of duplicating services, and reducing the gap in services.

- **Strategy 2.2.1: Focus on resources for priority populations.**

Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, and individuals with disabilities are substantially overrepresented in the homeless population. We will implement system and program changes to address equity within our CoC through identifying and addressing the needs of these subpopulations who are disproportionally more likely to experience homelessness. Strategies will include identifying barriers that led to any disparities and then taking the appropriate steps to eliminate those barriers. In an effort to eliminate disparity barriers, actions will include the review local policies, procedures, and

processes to determine where and how to address disparities affecting the underserved communities experiencing homelessness.

- **Strategy 2.2.2: Develop effective non-profit membership.**

With a clear understanding of the target population, the Membership Committee will recruit individuals and organizations that would benefit from supporting the CoC's goals and objectives. Additionally, the committee will establish a reasonable membership fee that can enhance the income stream to sustain basic needs as staff works to serve the individuals and families experiencing homelessness or who are at-risk of becoming homeless.

- **Strategy 2.2.3: Reduce duplication of services.**

At times, the cooperation of various human service agencies, both public and private, result in the duplication of efforts. Therefore, in order to promote efficiency and economy of administration in serving unhoused individuals or those at risk of becoming homeless, strategic actions will include increase engagement with cross-functional teams. These cross-functional teams will include individuals with lived experience, the healthcare providers, mainstream service providers, victim service providers, and political leaders.

- **Strategy 2.2.4: Reduce the gap in services.**

This CoC works closely with the local government to create stable housing for individuals and families experiencing homeless or who may be at risk of becoming homeless. Unfortunately, based on the local government's contract year in comparison to the grants' contract year, there is often a gap in services for clients who are in need of rental assistance. As a result, providers may exit clients from their program.

In response to this gap in services, this CoC will work with the local government to co-create a solution to this problem. Gap in services caused by misaligned contract/grant cycle dates will be eliminated as the local government adjusts their contract year to begin immediately following the end of the prior year's grant cycle.

*Objective 2.3: Create Engaged Community Stakeholders*

Increasing the influence of our organization is an important issue and concern. As a non-profit organization serving the most vulnerable members of our community, we have no political base, nor do we have influence based on the accumulation of tangible resources. Therefore, having the ability to analyze data to incorporate the use of visual reports, charts, and graphs is substantial in terms of being able to influence others. The strategy to build outreach capacity through influencing will positively affect program sustainability, community decision-making, and policy formulation.

- **Strategy 2.2.1: Build an infrastructure of collective impact to align resources, enable collaboration, and maintain transparency with the community.**

In an effort to develop and implement an engaged community of stakeholders, this CoC will connect and coordinate with a variety of stakeholders, including affordable housing developers, mainstream service providers, the business community, victim services providers, political leaders, and healthcare providers. The unification of intersecting systems in a shared approach should prevent people from being released into homelessness.

- **Strategy 2.2.2: Educate and inform community stakeholders.**

To educate and inform community stakeholders about the root causes of homelessness, our CoC will host a Humanity, Housing, and Homelessness Summit. The goal of the summit is to educate the community on our local issue surrounding affordable housing and homelessness. The summit will also serve as an opportunity for the community to offer questions and/or concerns regarding their interests in our unhoused community. The summit will consist of a panel of speakers (a person with lived experience, Mayor, DV, shelter staff, RRH staff) to respond to community questions.

Additionally, the CoC will produce Fact Sheets on many aspects of homelessness, including causes, numbers, and special issues. The fact sheet will allow individuals to familiarize themselves with the latest information, and then share what they learn with the community (colleagues, places of worship, schools, neighbors, friends, media, and elected officials).