

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Emergency Shelter System

ASSESSMENT OF CAPACITY & UTILIZATION

RELEASED APRIL 2019

RECOMMENDATIONS

MOVING TOWARD AN OPTIMAL EMERGENCY SHELTER SYSTEM

The emergency shelter system in Charlotte-Mecklenburg is uniquely positioned to play a significant role in the work to end and prevent homelessness and increase access to affordable housing. The system has begun the difficult work to coordinate and collaborate across individual shelters and explore complementary services to expand capacity without building new facilities. There are opportunities for staff from different emergency shelters to interact, learn from each other, and share best practices for implementation. The report was completed by Mecklenburg County Community Support Services in partnership with United Way of Central Carolinas.



Create a common language

It is important that all emergency shelters employ the same vocabulary to facilitate the move toward a shared vision and strategy. For example, the term “low-barrier access” is interpreted very differently across the emergency shelters. The emergency shelter system can utilize the surveys completed for this project to define key terms; these, in turn, will serve as an important foundation for collaboration and coordination.



Standardize practices that ensure equal access and treatment

After Coordinated Entry, emergency shelters are typically the first interaction people experiencing homelessness have with the homeless and housing services system. Emergency shelters across Charlotte-Mecklenburg have agency-specific policies and procedures; some can have a negative impact on already vulnerable populations who also find themselves experiencing the trauma of homelessness. Emergency shelters can collaborate to standardize behaviors and operations that support system-wide, trauma-informed and culturally competent policies and procedures. This can also help to address disparities in access and service across the emergency shelter system so that no one is denied access to emergency shelter when there is space available within the system.



Increase and expand diversion programs

Diversion assistance is a cost-effective method to help individuals and families avoid emergency shelter, while also freeing up beds for those who most need them. Research on diversion continues to show that most individuals and families who receive diversion assistance do not return to the shelter. Increasing diversion assistance across the full emergency shelter system would thereby reduce the inflow into shelters by, for example, providing diversion assistance to all populations rather than basing assistance on what a specific shelter offers. In addition, some communities proactively engage people who have exited emergency shelter and face another housing crisis. They do this by expanding diversion assistance to provide targeted support and assistance to prevent the person from returning to homelessness.



Find capacity

There are well-documented capacity needs at each emergency shelter in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, but the system is not organized for optimization. Individual emergency shelter capacity is limited by each individual shelter's physical, policy, and funding limitations. Collectively, emergency shelters can partner with each other to leverage existing resources and flex capacity. A true emergency shelter system would also increase its adaptability and capacity by partnering with other systems like the faith community and schools to expand access when absolutely necessary.



Track and use system-level data

In addition to using data individually, emergency shelters can look to system-level information and connect to coordinated entry data to track progress and identify gaps and opportunities. Moving data to the system-level allows all shelters to see the big picture and how each provider fits within it. Looking at the number of youth or single fathers unable to be served by one shelter is different than looking at that gap at the system level. This is also true for tracking the number of people who are turned away at a system level versus by each individual shelter. The system can also examine racial and gender disparities in access to shelter as well as housing. The emergency shelter system can set overall goals and indicators which align with the components of an effective system as identified herein. Finally, system-level data and planning allow for the community to right-size the system, ensuring that there are always enough emergency shelter beds for those that need it.



Strengthen housing connections

Many emergency shelters in the community already try to function as both a temporary shelter and a housing provider. This connection is critical to help facilitate rapid exits to housing. Providers can consider sharing positions like housing coordinators, who are focused on connecting shelter residents to housing, in order to increase coordination and maximize system resources. In addition, addressing flow into and out of emergency shelter is critical to increasing capacity and helping people connect to permanent housing. The emergency shelter system as a whole is well positioned to be a strong advocate in the community, and can collaborate to advance policies and practices that support connections between shelter and housing as well as more permanent, affordable housing solutions in the community. Access to and availability of permanent, affordable housing has a direct impact on both the number of people entering emergency shelter as well as their ability to leave it.



Conduct additional research

It is important to understand the populations experiencing homelessness or utilizing emergency shelter in order to create an effective emergency shelter system in the community. This understanding can provide additional insight into how existing emergency shelters can coordinate to expand capacity. Additional research on the utilization of space can help providers learn where shared space might be an option. As a system, emergency shelters can look at the overall flow into and out of programs in order to learn how to better align services with need and create capacity while preventing homelessness. Deeper dives into best practices and analysis of outcomes at the system level will improve efficacy; all of these efforts will inform and encourage funders. Research on policy and/or legislative initiatives would help the emergency shelter system better advocate for necessary reforms. Any new programs or changes in delivery of services should also be evaluated for impacts at the individual shelter and system levels. Finally, the emergency shelter system can better understand how and to what extent supportive services should be provided within emergency shelter to improve capacity and permanent housing outcomes.