Will County Continuum of Care

Serving Will, Kendall, and Grundy Counties

The CoC's Impact: 2023 Annual Report on Local Homelessness

The Will County Continuum of Care (CoC) is a collaborative dedicated to ending homelessness in Will, Kendall, and Grundy Counties in Illinois. This coalition has over 200 members and is responsible for annually allocating $7,579,129 in federal and state resources in a way that impacts the collective's goal to end homelessness.

At the unset of 2023, the CoC was faced with an unprecedented crisis of homelessness. The emergency shelter capacity in the region decreased by 90 nightly beds and for the first time ever, our cold winter was on track to have more people sleeping outside than in an emergency shelter.

During the 2023 Point in Time, an annual exhaustive count that documents the number of people experiencing homelessness on any given night in our region, over 40 volunteers canvased the three-county area to make sure we counted every person. This initiative confirmed our concerns- our communities had the highest report of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness ever recorded.

Homelessness in the CoC's region is a crisis. Its exacerbation, which is in part due to the pandemic but primarily due to historic underfunding of strategies to end homelessness and lack of housing in the communities, is unprecedented.

Tonight, in our Region

343 people are experiencing homelessness in our communities.

This was the largest report of homelessness in our region since 2010.

The unsheltered count was 98 people- an increase of 553% from the year before.

During the last reporting year, 971 people experienced homelessness that resulted in utilizing a crisis intervention. This is a conservative number that shares only who the Homeless Response System could serve- the need is much higher.

Housing is the solution to homelessness**.** Through the resources currently dedicated to end homelessness, the CoC's partners were able to house 215 people. This represents only 27% of those experiencing homelessness. This system is extremely under resourced. However, once people are housed the CoC's evidenced-based interventions prove their efficiency with a 98% rate of success. Increased investment in this work will decrease homelessness now and permanently.

In 2023, our CoC worked as a team to transform our crisis interventions, focused on evidenced-based solutions, and committed to increasing housing focused work throughout the entire region. This report provides an overview of local homelessness, the CoC's funding allocations dedicated to the region's response to homelessness, and the strategic initiatives to help end homelessness.

Together, we can end homelessness.

Merridith Montgomery
Continuum of Care Executive Director
mary@uwwill.org

Brent DeCarlo
HMIS System Administrator
brent@uwwill.org

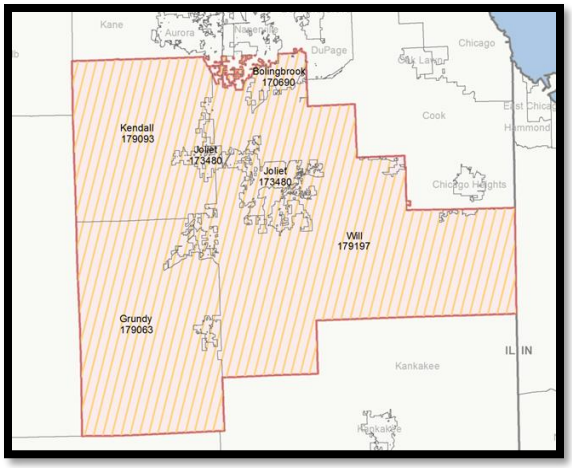
Mike Mealer
Coordinated Entry System Coordinator
mikem@uwwill.org

https://willcountycoc.com/

United Way of Will County

Report on Local Homelessness

The CoC uses two reports to understand the local experiences of homelessness. The Point in Time (PIT) report shares the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness on any given night. The System Performance Measures (SysPM) provides an understanding of the current Homeless Response System- who it serves, what those it serves experiences, the resources they gain, and how the system is doing at connecting people to permanent housing.

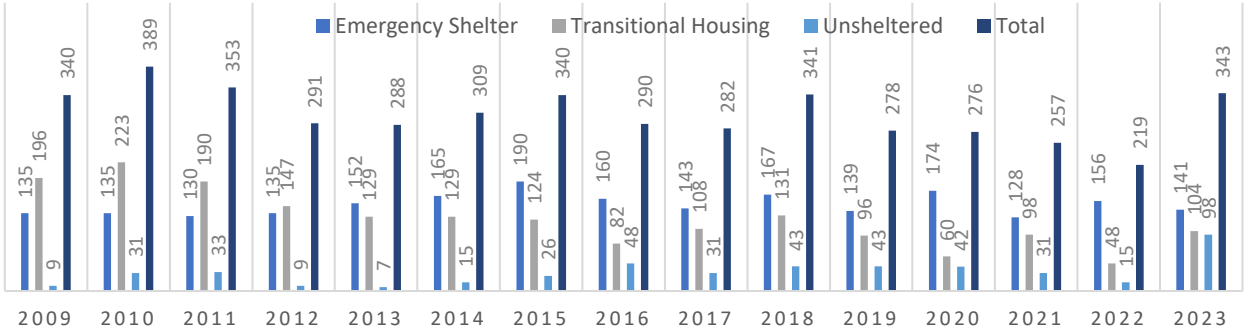


2023 Point In Time Findings:

On any given night, 343 people are experiencing homelessness in Will, Kendall, and Grundy counties. This means they are sleeping in a literal homeless situation- like an emergency shelter, transitional housing, or in an unsheltered situation in a place not meant for human habitation.

- Adults without children are the overwhelming majority of people experiencing homelessness, representing 87% of households.
- Vulnerable health conditions are experienced at much higher proportions among those experiencing unsheltered homelessness. People experiencing unsheltered homelessness are 2.3 times more likely to be chronically homeless (meaning they are people with living with a disabling condition and experiencing long term homelessness), nearly 3 times more likely to have a serious mental illness, and 2 times more likely to have HIV/AIDs.
- Unaccompanied youth (ages 18-24) and children (under 18 years old) make up 26% of the population served in emergency shelter or transitional housing.
- People who are experiencing homelessness because of domestic violence make up 15% of the entire homeless population.
- Veterans represent 4% of the population experiencing homelessness.
- People with mental health or substance use disorders are a small portion of the entire population experiencing homelessness, representing 12% and 4% of people experiencing homelessness' experience.

A History in Snapshots



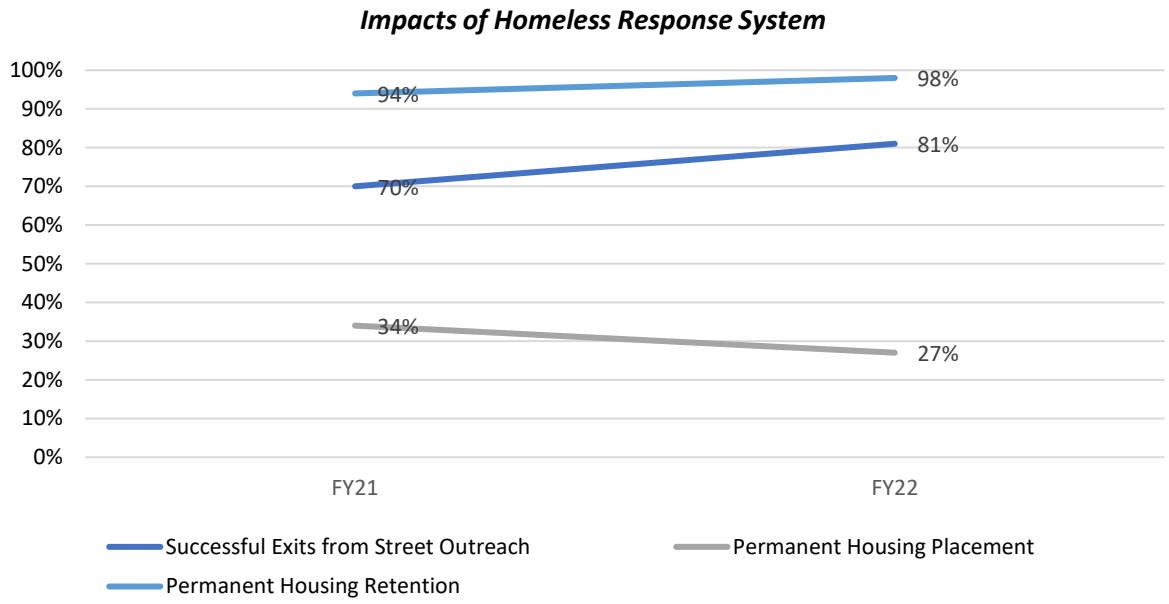
System Performance Measure shares a different perspective- how is the system doing at ending homelessness. A robust Homeless Response System provides interventions for people at risk of homelessness and in the crisis of being without housing. This includes providing emergency shelter, street outreach, and housing interventions. The fundamental goal of a Homeless Response System is to get as many people connected to permanent housing, as quickly as possible.

The SysPM report documents the Homeless Response System's impact from 10/01/2021-9/30/2022. The local Homeless Response System served 971 people during this time in either a crisis intervention or a housing solution.

Key findings:

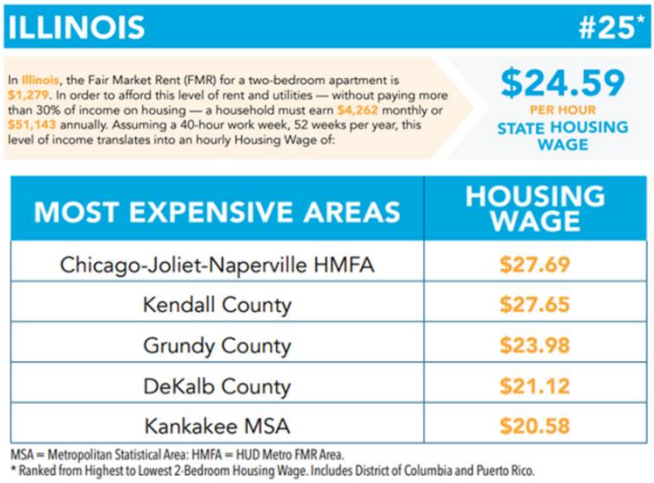
- 92% of people utilized an emergency shelter at some point that year and the average stay was 71 days.
- 83% reported it was their first-time experiencing homelessness.
- 11% of the people were served by the homeless response system in the last two years or experienced a return to homelessness.
- Most people have income when they experience homelessness. The housing interventions helped 44% of adults who entered their programs increase their income.

When looking at the key performance indicators, the CoC focuses on three important measures: Successful Exits from Street Outreach, Permanent Housing Placement, and Permanent Housing Retention.



An important indication of a Homelessness Response System's success is that people are connected to permanent housing- resolving the crisis of homelessness for those people. The CoC will continue to work on improving the exits to permanent housing measure in 2024, building on critical investments made in 2023 from new state and federal resources dedicated to this effort by the CoC's Board.

The Region's Housing Conditions



It is crucial to understand the housing conditions that exist in the CoC's geographic region. Based on census data, we know a lot about our region. The CoC represents 7% of the constituents of Illinois. The CoC's region lacks housing stock that meets its constituents' needs. Until regional housing stock meets the needs of all its community members, homelessness will persist.

The Homeless Response System is dedicated to helping people regain housing as quickly as possible once they experience homelessness. Local government and jurisdiction can aid in the end of homelessness by adopting strategies to ensure housing stock meets its community members' needs. Without housing, we can't end homelessness permanently.

- In the tri-county region, less than 20% of the housing stock is available for renters (the state's average is 34.5%). *
- The region's average gross rent exceeds the states' average by $199/month. *
- 2023 Out of Reach Report shows that the tri-county region has the highest hourly wages necessary to afford rent in the state of Illinois.
- Local Housing Solutions' Housing Assessment Data reports that the region has ***13,208*** studio or 1-bedroom units- there are 153,619 One- to Two-Person Households in the area. They recommend, "In areas with a tight housing supply and a larger number of households than units in this comparison, there may be opportunities to improve affordability by developing new studio or one-bedroom units".
- All of our regions, according to Local Housing Solutions' Housing Assessment Data, have lower rental vacancy rates than the state average: Joliet's vacancy rate is 5.8%, Will County's vacancy rate is 5.9%, Grundy County's' vacancy rate is 2.2%, and Kendall County is the most severe at 0.7%.

*US Census Data

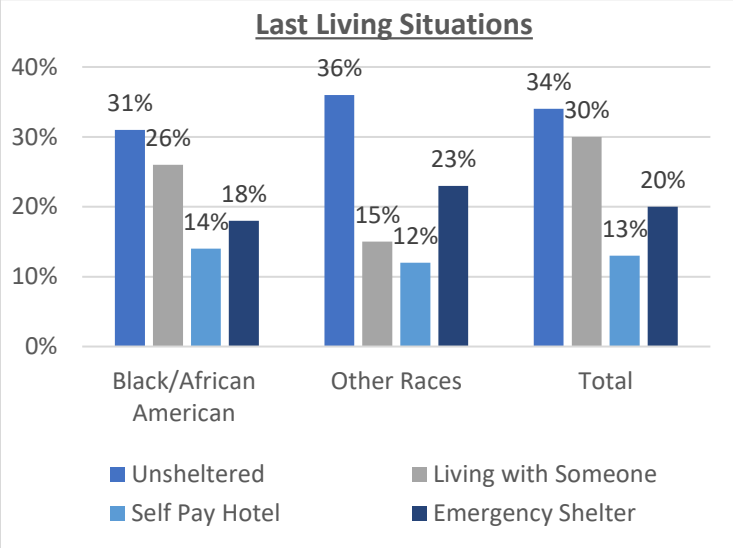
Racial Disparities Assessment

The CoC conducted a racial disparities assessment on its Homeless Response System. We utilized US Census Data, Stella P reports of Longitudinal Systems Analysis (LSA), and intake data from our locally maintained Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The LSA is the same data collected in the System Performance Measures but visualized through the Stella P reports available from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In a review of the Racial and Ethnic Demographics represented in our geographic region we note 80% of our region's households identify as white with the next largest subpopulation identifying as Black or African Americans. Black or African Americans represent 12% of our community's population.

All races and ethnic subgroups are either proportionally represented in the homeless experience or they are underrepresented, except those who are Black or African American. The racial disparity of Black or African Americans within the CoC's Homeless Response System is drastic. While this demographic represents only 12% of our community's population, within homelessness they represent 46% of those we serve. In a review of exits to permanent housing, households have representative rates of exits based on their race and ethnicity. This review concludes that there are not racial disparities within the provision of services nor the outcomes of the CoC's Homeless Response System and that of the CoC Programs.

The CoC recognizes that there is a disparity in the homeless experience. The CoC will further review the experiences of households prior to entry into our Homelessness Response System and determine which strategies can help reduce this disparity of the homeless experience of our Black or African American neighbors. A review of the last living situations of households within this same time period shows that Black or African American households are experiencing higher rates of living with someone else before they experience homelessness. This will be reported to the CoC's Shelter Diversion Work Group so that they can create strategies among shelter diversion, homelessness prevention, and crisis intervention components to improve racial disparities.



The CoC Collaborative Process Development Initiative will create a working group to explore more strategies to ensure the Will County CoC is grounded in racial equity. In Spring 2024, this group will provide recommendations to the CoC Board so that the CoC is actively addressing these disparities identified within our region. This initiative will also update monitoring and evaluation practices for all of the components of the CoC's Homelessness Response System and ensure our funding recommendation aligns with racial equity.

Funding Allocations

The CoC is a collaborative dedicated to ending homelessness in Will, Kendall, and Grundy Counties in Illinois. Our geographic region is very diverse consisting of urban, suburban, and rural communities. The Will County Continuum of Care intends on maximizing our funding allocations to end homelessness in our communities. The CoC strategically determines which projects will create the strongest portfolio of housing options, crisis response interventions, and services to meet this goal. The CoC oversees 5 separate funding recommendations, which include a local application process and strategic recommendations of resources to government funders.

Strategies for funding recommendations are based on local data, an assessment of needs, and focused on meeting our collective's mission- ending homelessness. The CoC recognizes that funding

opportunities are scarce and do not meet the needs of our communities' homelessness crisis, therefore we strive to improve our alignment of funding so that we impact our local communities the most.

Funding Name	Funder	2022	2023*
CoC Program	Federal	$4,930,145	$4,998,416
Home Illinois	State	$0	$1,178,337
Special CoC Program	Federal	$0	$796,195
Emergency Solutions Grant	State/Federal	$347,604	$408,181
Homelessness Prevention	State	$198,000	$198,000
	Total	$5,475,749	$7,579,129

** Annual award amounts announced in 2023*

In 2023, the CoC's funding portfolio expanded by over $2 million annually. This came from increases gained in federally competitive funding, increases in resources advocated for by CoC at the state, new funding from the Governor's effort to end homelessness through Home Illinois, and a historic award of competitive federal funding to help combat unsheltered homelessness.

- Through the inaugural state funding opportunity, the CoC will expand its housing portfolio with 42 new scattered-site permanent housing units. Additionally, the CoC will implement its first shelter diversion strategy with dedicated funding to this intervention.

- The Special CoC Program funds will provide dedicated funds to street outreach and create 19 CoC funded housing units and 31 leveraged units, increasing our bed inventory by 50 new units.

Initiatives to End Homelessness

In 2023, the CoC's work was intentional in reflection on the Homeless Response System's needs after the devasting effects of the pandemic and recentering our strategies in evidence-based philosophies and the foundation that housing is the solution to homelessness.

Emergency Solutions Partnership Plan (June 2023)

The Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) enables the CoC to develop a core crisis response infrastructure within our Homeless Response System. Crisis Response components of the Homeless Response System focus on connecting with people experiencing the crisis of being without housing.

ESG dedicated resources to core elements of our Crisis Response. Annually, the CoC will allocate ESG resources based on the needs assessment of our communities. The intention of the allocation is to support the core of the Crisis Response infrastructure so that it enables any additional community resources to expand the crisis interventions and focus on solving homelessness systematically.

Coordinating the crisis response begins with these shared philosophies:

Homelessness is a housing crisis.

The Homeless Response System's crisis component's responsibility is to provide interventions to households that serve the emergency of being without shelter, through directly providing shelter or providing access to the Homeless Response System through outreach and engagement.

The CoC determined allocations based on the following factors: insufficient emergency shelter opportunities in the CoC region, reduction in emergency shelter beds, increase in unsheltered homelessness, dangerousness of the unsheltered crisis, domestic violence and victimization of those experiencing homelessness, and housing focused solutions to homelessness to increase exits from crisis interventions.

Coordination

This is the inaugural partnership plan of the ESG program. The intention is to create a foundation that allows the crisis components of the Homeless Response System to function systematically and be provided CoC support to be housing focused. This will align the crisis components with the system's work of ending homelessness.

The partners in this plan make the following commitments:

- The primary shelter interventions are Daybreak and Groundwork and are site-based shelters. They should operate as low barrier interventions. These programs will strive to operate a capacity at all times. There will be no waiting list for these programs.
    - Daybreak Center can be reached at (815) 774-7663.
    - Groundwork can be reached at (815) 729-1228 for people experiencing homelessness due to domestic violence.
- Daybreak and Groundwork will be available for referrals from the Will-Grundy Medical Clinic Street outreach team. They will coordinate direct access to Emergency Shelter: Congregate whenever possible.
- Street outreach will be available throughout the entire geographic region. The hotline to coordinate outreach and engagement is (815) 426-4447. This is available to all community partners.
- Emergency Shelter: Non-Congregate will be coordinated among all three of the Emergency Shelter providers in this partnership. The partners will ensure that those who cannot be served by the Emergency Shelter: Congregate are referred to the Emergency Shelter: Non-Congregate, when available. The Emergency Shelter: Non-Congregate may also connect households to Emergency Shelter: Congregate when appropriate.
- All ESG providers will act as a direct entry point for the Will County Coordinated Entry System's intake assessment. Emergency Shelter partners will provide an intake to households within 3 days of entry. Street Outreach partners will provide access immediately or when household provides permission.
- In order to increase exits directly from the emergency shelter, the ESG rapid rehousing resources will be prioritized to serve households in the Emergency Shelter components in this partnership. These referrals will be generated from the Will County CoC's Coordinated Entry System and dedicated to increasing exits from the Emergency Shelter.

The partners will meet regularly to build practices that operationalize this partnership plan. These practices will be codified into the CoC HRS' operations through a CoC policy by 6/30/2024.

Experts: Leaders with Lived Experience

Project HELP, Homelessness Ends Lifting Peers, is an initiative led by people who have experienced homelessness. Their goal is to help end homelessness in the Will County Continuum of Care.

Project HELP coordinates outreach efforts to connect with our most vulnerable community members- those experiencing unsheltered homelessness. These efforts have helped people that are experiencing unsheltered homelessness obtain basic necessities- often critical to their survival.

HELP Peers are people who have experienced homelessness in our communities. The HELP Peers are committed to ending homelessness because they have been there, and they know what it feels like when *homelessness ends*. They build strong connections through their shared experiences *and lift their peers* during their housing crisis.

Project HELP creates peer supports for people in housing crisis. This outreach is crucial in engaging people least likely to connect to our community's Homeless Response System. Through collaboration, community partners can provide supportive services with the HELP Peers that end housing crises by connecting people to housing and services that meet their needs. Working together, we can end homelessness.

Also, the CoC introduced its Initiative to Support Leaders with Lived Experience within our CoC Special NOFO (SNOFO) application in 2022. The CoC believes that leaders with lived experience play an important role in our work. It is equitable to ensure that resources are available to provide compensation for their contributions in planning, implementation, and evaluation of the system and its projects.

The CoC's work to support leaders of lived experience is crucial to our system's improvement.

- The people who know best what solutions will effectively end homelessness are those who are experiencing homelessness.
- HUD expects CoCs to include people with lived homeless expertise and experience in their local planning and decision-making process.
- People with lived experience should determine how local policies may need to be revised and updated to improve the effectiveness of homelessness assistance programs, including participating in planning and oversight activities, and developing local competition processes.
- CoC leaders and stakeholders should prioritize hiring people who have experienced homelessness in areas where their expertise is needed.

Foundations: Housing First. Housing Focused. Housing Stability.

This initiative will help shift the Homeless Services System into a Crisis Reponses System that focus on rapidly resolving homelessness through housing.

Objectives:

- Develop the capacity of crisis responses so that these components can serve the entire geographic region- meeting people where they are at, serving people in their communities, and helping them return to housing as quickly as possible.
- Increase capacity for non-congregate emergency shelter opportunities for households with severe service needs and in areas where congregate shelter is unavailable.
- Improve coordination between homelessness prevention, emergency shelters, and street outreach teams through the implementation of a shelter diversion intervention.
- Ensure fidelity to housing first at the system, component, and project level.
- Expand progressive engagement opportunities within homelessness dedicated projects and cross system partnerships.
- Implement housing focused services provision at the system, component, and project level to rapidly resolving homelessness through housing.
- Create technical assistance opportunities annually for the CoC membership to enhance this focus.
- Collect and report on data to enable data-driven strategies.

Collaborative Process Development Initiative

Purpose: To align our strategic planning and funding allocations to maximize our impact.

Timeframe	Activity
July-October 2023	Jumping In: Focusing on the FY2023 CoC Program Competition, assigning NOFO sections to each work group to review and provide input on.
October – December 2023	System Analysis: Debrief the CoC Competition. Review and Update Written Standards and Community.
January-March 2024	Improve Infrastructure and Components: System level training and component focus improvement.
April- July 2024	Align Resources: Review Project Performance (dedicated Homeless Response System funding). Encourage alignment of resources from cross system partners. Raise awareness for increased resources to end homelessness.

Outcomes:

- Transition the CoC Project Selection process to a process that improves system performance and community impact
- Implement a Project Review Process that ensures alignment with CoC mission and strategies
- Identify areas of improvement and create strategies to attain improvement
- Ensure dedicated Homeless Response System funding creates a foundation that encourages alignment of recourses from cross system partners and increases resources to end homelessness

Partnership with the Illinois Office to Prevent and End Homelessness

100 Day Challenge on Rural Homelessness: The CoC participated in 100 Day Challenge in the summer of 2023 to strengthen the community-wide commitment and accelerate progress of ending rural homelessness. A diverse group of stakeholders helped create an authentic plan to best serve our communities. This goal was to help us understand the needs of our neighbors facing homelessness, the

partnerships needed to identify them, and create a rapid response to helping our neighbors experiencing homelessness resolve their crisis.

Results: During the challenge, we housed 38 households- 10 were Rural. Historically, 58% of the CoC's housing placements of in/from Joliet. Joliet constituents only represent about 17% of the CoC's geographic area. This challenge helped inform funding recommendation that allowed our CoC to increase regional equity of housing and services- for the first time allocated permanent supportive housing in the rural spaces and investing in a dedicated rural project in FY2023 CoC Program Competition. A lot of work is still needed to ensure our entire geographic region has access to equitable the Homeless Response System.

Listening Sessions on the State Plan to End Homelessness: The CoC hosted two listening sessions for the state plan to end homelessness. The session dedicated to individuals with lived experience had more than 50 experts with lived experience- the best attended session in the state.

100 Day Challenge: Unsheltered Encampment Outreach: The CoC has been selected for the second state sponsored 100 Day Challenge this winter. We are the only community to participate in both challenges!

Ending Unsheltered Homelessness: Award of Historic Funding

Unsheltered homelessness experiences are dangerous, leaving people without a safe space to sleep and disconnected from the homeless response system. The CoC's Homeless Response System was devastated by the pandemic, significantly reducing emergency shelter in our three-county region. Our communities have documented unprecedented numbers of neighbors experiencing unsheltered homelessness. People experiencing unsheltered homelessness should have access to crisis interventions, including street outreach, emergency shelter, and housing and resource referral systems, without barriers.

Unsheltered homelessness is a crisis. A commitment of urgency is critical because the severity of this crisis unresolved will result in the loss of lives.

The Will County Continuum of Care, serving Will, Kendall, and Grundy Counties, is proud to announce the US Department of Housing and Urban Development has awarded our CoC $2,388,585 from its special award for unsheltered homelessness. We are one of only 32 communities nationwide to receive this award.

Applicant	Project Name	Total 3 Year Amount
Will Grundy Medical Clinic	Housing, Healthcare, and Hope	$589,227
Trinity Services	Trinity Rapid Rehousing	$814,515
Cornerstone Services	Cornerstone Permanent Supportive Housing	$821,842
Holsten Human Capital Development	River Walk Unsheltered Permanent Supportive Housing	$163,001

In 2022, our CoC launched an initiative committed to ending unsheltered homelessness, the Pathway to End Unsheltered Homelessness. This initiative's team reviewed unsheltered homelessness, its exasperation, barriers within the homeless response system, and created strategies to end unsheltered homelessness.

Objectives of the Pathway to End Unsheltered Homelessness Initiative

1. Ensure meaningful and intentional input is integrated into the CoC's work from leadership with lived experience of homelessness, especially experiences of unsheltered homelessness.

2. Centralized point of access for all unsheltered households to receive assessment and referrals for the homeless crisis system.

3. Partnership with current shelters and providers able to provide non congregate shelter to ensure immediate access to shelter for those households who choose it.

4. Working in partnership with crisis systems in the CoC communities, including fire departments, hospitals, health departments, and police departments, so that when these systems engage with people in housing crises- connection to the Homeless Response System is simple and systematic. This partnership should lessen the burden households experiencing a housing crisis in accessing critical resources and increase community partners' ability to access the Homeless Response System.

5. Increase the capacity of the housing interventions to provide housing to those experiencing unsheltered homelessness- specifically focusing on implementing trauma-informed responses through Housing 1st and Progressive Engagement strategies.

6. Leveraging resources to expand housing and services within the CoC. The CoC's communities' resources are becoming more scarce, due to economic reasons influenced by the pandemic and long existing employment challenges of the human services sector. The CoC will leverage its partnerships with the housing authorities, child welfare, veterans' affairs, victim service providers, education institutions, workforce, legal services, and health partners. This will build community capacity to respond to the crisis of homelessness- specifically improving the urgent response of serving those households experiencing unsheltered.

Will County Continuum of Care's Plan for Serving Individuals and Families Experiencing Homelessness with Severe Service Needs

"…The CoC HMIS documents between 31% and 37% of those served within our Homeless Response System have experienced unsheltered homelessness. In FY20, the CoC reported less than .005% of our crisis intervention engagements were through street outreach. In FY21, that increased 12 times, now accounting for 8% of crisis intervention engagements in our CoC. Our street outreach component has a 70% success rate of housing people who are unsheltered. Our CoC permanent housing projects intake 46% of households directly from an unsheltered situation, with an average 91% housing success rate. Our regional shelter capacity plummeted 52% because of the impacts of the pandemic, the CoC expects rates of unsheltered homelessness to continue to rise significantly."

7. Data-informed strategies will provide the direction of the CoC's work. The CoC strives to improve data collection to ensure local data's usability.

8. Collective Voice- Raising Awareness Together. The Pathway Team will lead awareness, education, and advocacy efforts to ensure the communities are informed about homelessness.

The CoC has a history of aligning resources, developing and implementing successful strategies, and scaling them up to end homelessness. Our CoC was the 50th Community to End Veteran Homelessness, recognized by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, using many of the evidence-based practices identified in our Pathway to End Unsheltered Homelessness.