California Cohort 1: 100-Day Challenge Case Study

Riverside County: Addressing Senior Homelessness

Riverside County established a focus on providing connections to permanent housing for seniors participating in Project Roomkey during their 100-Day Challenge, helping the community to develop improved community-wide processes and interventions to meet the needs of seniors experiencing homelessness.

HOW RIVERSIDE COUNTY MADE IT HAPPEN

Prior to the 100-Day Challenge, key stakeholders across Riverside County had already begun to focus on the unique challenges of seniors experiencing homelessness. The COVID-19 crisis increased the vulnerability of seniors experiencing homelessness, with older adults identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as one of the populations at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19. In response, Riverside County dedicated the work of their 100-Day Challenge to connecting seniors age 65 and over participating in Project Roomkey to permanent housing options. The County chose to leverage the unique collaborative opportunity of the 100-Day Challenge to increase both provider and system level capacity to serve seniors experiencing homelessness, including those with disabilities and/or complex medical conditions.

The 100-Day Challenge helped Riverside County increase attention around the importance of meeting the needs of seniors experiencing unsheltered homelessness and accelerated local momentum around finding housing solutions that are appropriate and sustainable for seniors transitioning out of homelessness. The 100-Day Challenge Team mobilized frontline workers from across providers and systems of care to help seniors participating in Project Roomkey obtain documentation and make connections to available housing and services. Throughout the 100-Day Challenge, Riverside County was able to secure permanent housing for 58 seniors (with an additional 16 seniors pending housing placement on Day 100 of the Challenge) and issue 120 housing vouchers for seniors participating in Project Roomkey. Riverside County is committed to sustaining and institutionalizing changes in organizational culture, communication and housing processes to continue the progress made during the 100-Day Challenge and set the County on a path to continue housing seniors at a rate substantially higher than before the Challenge.

Key Takeaways:

- Seniors experiencing homelessness have distinct vulnerabilities and needs that should be considered during their housing process.
- Communities should work directly with seniors to understand their needs, vulnerabilities, and housing preferences and to use this information to shape Housing and Care Plans for seniors.
- Seniors should have access to a wide range of housing and services, including shared housing and higher level of care options such as board and care facilities.
- Changes to coordinated entry can help improve the local response to senior homelessness, including development of a senior By-Name List and changes to prioritization processes to better reflect seniors' vulnerabilities.
- Partners such as Adult Protective Services, In-Home Supportive Services, and your County Office of Aging can play a crucial role in improving housing and services for seniors experiencing homelessness.

"We need to make sure in the housing process, we are giving [our seniors] the opportunity to be heard and be served." – Marcus Dillard, Housing Authority of the County of Riverside

1) Understand the Distinct Needs of Seniors Experiencing Homelessness

The Riverside County 100-Day Challenge Team dedicated significant time and effort to understanding and responding to the distinct needs of seniors experiencing homelessness. The Team found that seniors participating in Project Roomkey often have different and distinct needs from other populations of persons experiencing homelessness, including increased complexity of medical conditions, issues with cognitive impairment, and a need for higher levels of care and support in shelter and housing placements. The Team also found that most seniors participating in Project Roomkey were living on a fixed income, which restricts the types of permanent housing placements that would be reasonable and sustainable in the long-term for senior guests. Riverside County has worked directly with seniors participating in Project Roomkey to better understand what housing and service interventions work for them, which do not, and what supports are needed in order to help them achieve housing stability. Overall, Riverside County found that there is a need to work more intentionally and patiently with seniors in order to facilitate successful transitions out of homelessness and into safe and stable housing. This more intentional approach includes taking more time to walk seniors through the housing process, making more attempts to find the right housing and service options suited to their vulnerabilities and needs, and facilitating more connections to services in order to address their comprehensive housing and health care needs.

2) Identify Current Gaps in the System Where Seniors are Not Being Adequately Served

Riverside County utilized the 100-Day Challenge to help identify areas of improvement within the homeless response systems where seniors are not being adequately or appropriately served. By bringing together frontline staff and system leaders from organizations across the County, the 100-Day Challenge Team gained new insights into working with seniors experiencing homelessness. The Team came to the conclusion that seniors too often "fall through the cracks" in the adult homelessness system and often unable to access the full range of services they need to transition out of homelessness and into permanent housing. Riverside County is working to reimagine the process of Coordinated Entry for seniors, including developing a senior-focused By-Name List and revisiting the prioritization process to ensure that the vulnerabilities of seniors are adequately reflected, such as increased vulnerability due to complex medical conditions and increased risk of severe illness due to COVID-19. The Team also utilized the knowledge and experience it gained throughout the 100-Day Challenge to develop a Housing Service Roadmap for ending senior homelessness in Riverside County. This Roadmap shows the flow of seniors experiencing homelessness through the homeless response system from the point of identification to housing placement and follow-up case management, including where key partner agencies are involved in the process. This Roadmap will be used to help identify and address housing barriers and to create a better housing response system for seniors in the months following the 100-Day Challenge.

3) Engage Key Stakeholders Working with Seniors in Making Connections to Housing and Services

During the 100-Day Challenge, Riverside County established strong cross-systems partnerships in order to appropriately and adequately meet the needs of senior participating in Project Roomkey. The community leveraged the 100-Day Challenge to make a strong push to broaden the range of agencies – including non-profit service providers and government agencies – involved in addressing the homelessness and housing crisis for seniors in Riverside County. The Team incorporated representatives from housing agencies, the County Public Housing Authority, service providers, city officials, and representatives from a number of County departments,

including Public Social Services, Mental Health, Adult Protective Services, In-Home Supportive Services, Office of Aging, and Veterans Services. Many of these partners had robust experience either working with persons experiencing homelessness or working with seniors, but the focused effort of the 100-Day Challenge allowed these organizations to come together and improve their processes for serving seniors experiencing homelessness as a distinct population of focus. Additionally, increased collaboration with agencies that serve seniors helped the community better identify the complex health, housing, and service needs of seniors and incorporate these considerations into the homeless and housing response systems. These partnerships have been crucial for helping seniors navigate the homeless response system, including significant involvement from Adult Protective Services and the Office of Aging in providing referrals for housing and services, supporting seniors in creating a Housing Plan or Care Plan, and coordinating case management and continuity of care throughout the housing process.

4) Invest in Housing Interventions that Better Reflect the Needs and Vulnerabilities of Seniors

The Riverside County 100-Day Challenge team has utilized their increased understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of seniors experiencing homelessness to explore new housing models and intervention targeted to this population. The Team is considering a wide range of innovative housing options, including shared housing, back-yard houses, casitas, skilled nursing facilities, and board-and care facilities, and is working to identify which of these options can best meet the needs and preferences of seniors experiencing homelessness. Riverside County is looking to secure more options outside of one-bedroom units and to expand shared housing opportunities after learning from Project Roomkey guests that many seniors experiencing homelessness would prefer not to live alone. Additionally, the Team recognized throughout the 100-Day Challenge that many seniors have higher level of care needs that may require in-unit care options, in turn requiring different and larger housing unit configurations. The Team is also working to broaden the use of a locally developed Housing Locator Tool – a web-based application similar to Zillow – to include a focus specifically on housing options for seniors. Team leaders are committed to ensuring the sustainability of the Team's housing efforts and are working to implement a county-wide strategy to ensure that appropriate support services are in place once seniors are housed to support ongoing housing stability.