



North Carolina Balance of State Continuum of Care

bos@ncceh.org

919.755.4393

www.ncceh.org/BoS

2023 North Carolina Balance of State Continuum of Care Coordinated Entry System Evaluation

Overview

On January 23, 2017, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued [Notice: CPD-17-01 Establishing Additional Requirements for a Continuum of Care Centralized or Coordinated Assessment System](#). The notice states, "CoCs must solicit feedback at least annually from participating projects and from households that participated in coordinated entry during that time period. Solicitations must address the quality and effectiveness of the entire coordinated entry experience for both participating projects and households..." In conjunction with this notice, the North Carolina Balance of State Continuum of Care (NC BoS CoC) completed the required annual evaluation of the coordinated entry (CE) system in 2023.

The NC BoS CoC Coordinated Entry Council (CEC) began reviewing and updating the Permanent Housing and Shelter and/or Street Outreach surveys in March 2023. During the 2022 CE Evaluation process, the CoC identified areas of the evaluation process that need improvement. In response to these identified sections, the CEC discussed how to engage more providers for a wider range of responses, how to align the provider survey with the client surveys, and how to ensure the surveys are confidential and anonymous. On March 20, 2023, the CEC approved a motion for the 2023 NC BoS CoC CE evaluation process and timeframe. The CEC directed regional CE Leads to oversee the distribution and collection of surveys for their respective geographic areas. Each regional CE Lead needed to return all completed surveys to North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness (NCCEH) staff by May 26, 2023.

NCCEH staff reviewed all surveys, compiled data, and reported outcomes to the CEC. The CEC will discuss system improvements and help facilitate changes in the CoC using the evaluation. NCCEH staff reviewed 93 shelter and/or street outreach surveys, 33 permanent housing surveys, and 38 provider surveys, which is a 10% increase in survey participation from the 2022 CE Evaluation.

Methods

The NC BoS CoC conducted the evaluation of its coordinated entry system in April 2023, with the following timeline for implementation:

- 1) Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH): PSH clients who have entered a PSH program in the last year will be offered the opportunity to complete the coordinated entry evaluation survey that asks about their experience of the coordinated entry system. The timeframe for PSH surveys was April 3, 2023, through May 26, 2023.
- 2) Shelters and/or Street Outreach: All people completing the VI-SPDAT will be offered the opportunity to complete the coordinated entry evaluation survey that asks about their experience of the coordinated entry system. Every client that receives a VI-SPDAT between May 15, 2023, through May 26, 2023, in the CoC must be offered the shelter and/or street outreach survey.
- 3) Rapid Rehousing: All clients housed by a rapid rehousing program in the CoC must be offered this survey within 30 days (before or after) they are housed.



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The evaluation consisted of three elements:

- 1) Surveys to participating provider agencies.
- 2) Surveys to people who are enrolled in permanent housing programs (rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing) and were housed in the last year.
- 3) Surveys to people currently experiencing homelessness. People in shelters and people experiencing unsheltered homelessness were surveyed.

Survey results were analyzed by the North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness and the NC Balance of State CoC Coordinated Entry Council.

The provider agency survey asked questions about each aspect of the CE system:

- Prevention and Diversion
- Shelter (Emergency and Domestic Violence)
- Assessment (VI-SPDAT)
- Case conferencing
- Referrals to permanent housing

Participating service providers were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the part of the system in which they participate, meeting the goals of the CoC, and meeting their agency goals. The surveys to people in permanent housing and people currently experiencing homelessness asked about their experience of the CE system, whether the system met their needs, and their satisfaction with service providers.

Summary

This evaluation allows NC BoS CoC to evaluate and continue to improve its CE system. It provides a basic snapshot of how CE is working in the CoC but also poses additional questions the CoC could integrate into future evaluations. This evaluation shows that the CoC has implemented the basic aspects of coordinated entry throughout its geographic area:

- Access points attempt to help people find shelter and emergency services, including domestic violence shelter and services.
- People experiencing homelessness are assessed for permanent housing using the same screening tool, the VI-SPDAT.
- Permanent housing programs take the majority of their referrals from the CE system.



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The CoC could make improvements to its CE system:

- Emergency shelters should continue to lower barriers and become more housing-focused.
- The VI-SPDAT does not score clients accurately and has been shown to cause racial disparities. The CoC is piloting a new CE assessment and prioritization schedule.
- Front door providers need more support from Permanent Housing (PH) programs to provide a warm transfer when a household has been identified and referred for a PH slot and/or voucher.
- People experiencing homelessness in the CoC are not offered permanent housing options quickly. The CoC should continue to try to reduce the length of time people experience homelessness and have discussions on how to increase affordable housing.

Provider surveys

Provider agencies completed 38 surveys. Survey respondents included agencies that participated in every part of the CE system. Provider surveys were completed in 10 of the 13 Regions of NC BoS CoC, with no information submitted for Regions 8, 11, and 13.

Most agencies that completed the survey participate in CE by conducting the VI-SPDAT, attending case conferencing meetings, and/or receiving permanent housing referrals.

Prevention and Diversion

The first step in the NC BoS CoC's coordinated entry process is to conduct the Prevention and Diversion (P&D) Screen. This screen is intended to accomplish three things:

- 1) Divert households from homelessness by identifying alternative solutions to their housing crisis;
- 2) Identify households that need immediate referral to a domestic violence service provider for safety planning; and
- 3) Refer households to emergency shelter, if they cannot be diverted.

Approximately 77% of the respondents said the P&D screen generally does divert households from homelessness and allows the household time and space to think through other housing options. Agencies stated the P&D screening tool provides an opportunity for mediation, with 67% of agencies stating they provide mediation assistance. However, 57% stated if the agency could not divert the household, then shelter beds are not available in their community.

When asked if the agency can provide safety planning to households fleeing domestic violence, 59% of respondents stated that their agency does not provide safety planning, but it is available in the community. 91% stated when a client is referred to a domestic violence shelter, they are unable to obtain a bed.

Respondents indicated many ideas for how to improve the prevention and diversion process. The CoC should consider these ideas and others to improve the prevention and diversion process and to increase access to emergency shelter. The ideas that were the most popular or may be most impactful included:



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- Increasing training regarding the prevention and diversion processes.
- More shelters for families experiencing homelessness.
- Ensuring emergency shelters are low barrier and housing focused.
- Work with the DV service providers to ensure survivors of DV, stalking, sexual assault, and human trafficking have a safe place to sleep.

VI-SPDAT

Everyone who experiences homelessness for more than 12-14 days in the NC BoS CoC should be assessed using the CoC-designated assessment called the VI-SPDAT. This tool helps prioritize households who are most vulnerable for permanent housing resources. To confidently prioritize households using the assessment, the VI-SPDAT should accurately reflect the needs of each household. 43% of respondents said the VI-SPDAT accurately reflects the needs of the people the organization serves while 40% said it is accurate about half the time.

Respondents identified the following strengths of the VI-SPDAT:

- Gain initial insight into the household's vulnerability
- Gathers historical information on household
- Learn more about households' health issues
- Provides a baseline for assessing housing needs across the NC BoS CoC

However, respondents generally agreed that the VI-SPDAT has problems with accurately reporting the needs of households. The two most cited weaknesses of the VI-SPDAT were:

- Underreports problems because clients may not be willing to divulge and/or do not feel comfortable in answering all the questions
- Lacks diversity, equity, and inclusion

The CoC participated in HUD's Coordinated Entry Equity Initiative from October 2021 through October 2022. In early 2023, NC BoS worked with Core Team members, health system experts, and university researchers to develop a new CE assessment and prioritization schedule that more accurately reflects the needs of households and supports diversity, equity, and inclusion. The new CE assessment is still in the pilot phase; however, the end goal of creating an equitable assessment tool (to replace the VI-SPDAT) is scheduled for early 2024.

Case conferencing

Case conferencing plays an essential role in the NC BoS CoC's coordinated entry system. Case conferencing meetings should help communities make good decisions about how to serve people experiencing homelessness, providing an opportunity to discuss cases, gathering additional information from multiple service providers, and connecting households to resources needed to end their homelessness.



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Case conferencing is only effective if it is well-attended. 95% of agencies said they attend case conferencing meetings. All CoC regions have an option to virtually join case conferencing, which has allowed more participation than previously.

Case conferencing is more effective if clients can be referred or connected to other resources besides CoC- and ESG-funded housing resources. 76% of respondents said their meeting does connect clients to other resources outside of the homeless service system.

Referrals to permanent housing

Most referrals from the CE system to permanent housing programs should be eligible for those programs. A majority (71%) of permanent housing programs said they always and/or usually receive eligible referrals, with a minority (19%) stating they sometimes, rarely, or never receive eligible referrals from the CE system.

Some households may be ineligible for a housing program to which they are referred. The NC BoS CoC CE designed the system this way: the system does not collect complete documentation on every household because it would slow the referral process. Instead, the CE system should conduct a basic assessment of eligibility and let the permanent housing provider determine eligibility as they collect supporting documentation. The NC BoS CoC should integrate discussions about eligibility into case conferencing to ensure most referrals are eligible.

CoC- and ESG-funded permanent housing programs should be taking all their new admissions directly from the CE by-name prioritization list. 81% of permanent housing programs take the majority of their referrals from CE. There are some permanent housing programs with other sources of funding, that are not required to take all referrals from CE, which could account for some referrals taken outside of CE. However, all CoC and ESG-funded permanent housing programs, should be able to identify households from the by-name list.

Surveys of people living in permanent housing

People living in permanent housing have been through every aspect of the coordinated entry system. The NC BoS CoC asked participants to evaluate their experience moving through the CE system. 33 people completed surveys, which is a 12% decrease from 2022. Providers offered surveys to all households housed in the last year and were completely optional and confidential. The survey asked respondents to evaluate the services they received while they were experiencing homelessness. The overwhelming majority of people said being connected to permanent housing was the most helpful service they received. Emergency shelter, connection to DV shelter, and food were also important.

Although our current CE system does not prioritize households for emergency shelter, connecting people experiencing homelessness to emergency services is one of the key functions of coordinated entry. 50% of respondents had no problems while staying in shelter. 6% said they could not enter



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shelter at which they presented, 22% said they were forced to leave a shelter, and 22% did not stay in shelter.

Six people reported problems while in shelter and stated they had problems with shelter staff and/or other shelter residents. Four people report feeling discriminated against by shelter staff and/or shelter staff not being respectful.

Coordinated entry should connect clients to permanent housing options that fit their needs. 78% of respondents stated they were offered housing options quickly. 100% stated the services they received were helpful and 60% stated they would not change anything about the services they were currently receiving.

Surveys of people currently experiencing homelessness

The NC BoS CoC collected surveys from people in emergency shelters and people living unsheltered. These surveys were confidential and completely optional. The access point offered the chance to complete a survey after the provider assessed the client using the VI-SPDAT.

Most surveys collected were from people in emergency shelters, with 73 shelter surveys completed. 20 respondents completed the unsheltered survey.

When asked what type of assistance would be most helpful, 94% of people stated that help getting into a housing program and/or food as their top priority.

Timeliness

The NC BoS CoC asked questions in every survey about how quickly the CE system connects people to permanent housing and services. For many people, the CE system quickly connects them to permanent housing, but approximately 27% of households in emergency shelter and 75% of households living unsheltered were not connected to permanent housing after 6 months.

A majority of people experiencing homelessness (78%) expected to find housing quickly, with 29% stating they expected to find housing in less than three months.

Unfortunately, people currently experiencing homelessness seem to have overly optimistic views of how long it will take to find permanent housing. The CoC should train provider staff to communicate the process and expected timeframe of finding affordable housing, so people currently experiencing homelessness have a more accurate expectation.

Emergency shelter responses overwhelmingly stated the lack of affordable housing as why the CE system may not connect people to housing in a timely manner.



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The CoC does not have enough resources to provide every person experiencing homelessness a referral to a CoC- or ESG-funded program. However, the resources the CoC does have should always receive timely referrals from CE. Although most permanent housing programs only wait 1 to 2 weeks for a referral from CE, 23% of providers keep slots open for a month or more.

These answers indicate that the CE system works relatively quickly, but some improvements could be made to decrease the time between referral and permanent housing placement.

The CoC could improve the timelines of referrals in CE in a few ways:

- Attempt to secure additional CoC and ESG housing resources.
- Attempt to secure additional permanent housing resources, like preferences through Public Housing Authorities or Housing Choice Voucher programs.
- Implement a progressive approach to housing in which most households are offered rapid rehousing assistance then moved to permanent supportive housing as necessary. This approach would prevent people with higher needs from waiting a long time for a PSH slot to open.
- Help shelters implement more housing-focused services to facilitate self-resolution.
- Identify and reduce barriers at case conferencing meetings to quickly fill open permanent housing slots.

Grievances

The NC BoS CoC's coordinated entry system provides a process to file grievances if a participant has felt mistreated or discriminated against in the CE process. Most of respondents were aware of this process, with 93% citing they did not feel discriminated against.

All survey respondents were offered the option to file a complaint. Five of the nine people who indicated they were discriminated against stated agencies lay outside of the NC BoS CoC, while the other three stated discrimination regarding emergency shelter, items being stolen, and disagreements with law enforcement.

Evaluation Improvements

The CoC learned a lot about its CE system in this evaluation and how to improve the evaluation itself. The CoC identified three areas of the evaluation process that need improvement: response rates, survey content, and response biases.

Response rates

The CoC should try to improve response rates to all the surveys, focusing on getting responses in every region so it can draw more granular conclusions. Due to the continued effects of the pandemic and the decrease of in-person services, the CoC expected lower participation rates in 2023. However, the CoC should consider adding CE evaluation participation to its annual CoC and/or ESG scoring process.



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Survey content

The provider surveys should allow for a wider range of responses. Most questions on the survey were written for agencies that provide permanent housing, but many agencies participate in CE and only provide services. The survey should include questions that pertain more directly to agencies that do not provide permanent housing. The CoC should consider adding regional focus groups to ensure those with lived expertise of homelessness are included in the creation of the survey questions.

Response Bias

Client surveys seemed more positive than expected and very few grievances were filed. Although it is probably true that most clients who receive services in the CoC are happy with those services, clients may have also felt pressure to answer positively for fear of losing services. Surveys should have been confidential and anonymous, but the CoC should ensure all clients understand that their surveys will not be seen by their service provider and will not affect their housing or services in any way.