



Guidance for Creating Regional Homeless Services Coordination Plans

In 2011 ODOD, as Balance of State Continuum of Care (BOSCO) lead and administer of state homeless funds, began exploring the concept of regionalizing the state of Ohio for administration of its homeless services programs and began the process of collecting stakeholder feedback. The purpose of moving to a regional approach is two-fold; first, regionalization will streamline the communication and delivery of administrative services among the BOSCO by organizing the 80 counties within the BOSCO into less than 20 regions. Second, the Emergency Solutions Grant regulations released by HUD in late 2011 indicate HUD's desire for a systems-level approach to ending homelessness, including proposing that Continuums move to a coordinated intake system. The BOSCO, made up of 80 counties, is too large to practically function under one coordinated intake system, requiring the creation of regional "hubs" to serve the same purpose. To the same end, each entitlement community will function as a standalone region for purposes of the ODOD's Homeless Crisis Response Program and Supportive Housing Program, which replace the Homeless Assistance Grant Program in program year 2012.

Each region will be responsible for creation of a Regional Homeless Services Coordination Plan (regional plan). The regional plan will set a framework for collaboration among providers of homeless and mainstream services, as well as for creating coordinated intake and assessment processes and referral systems. ODOD requirements for these plans will not be overly prescriptive, allowing flexibility for each region's local circumstances, but all plans must meet the requirements outlined in the Emergency Solutions Grant regulations as described below.

A small number of communities throughout the state are currently operating a centralized intake process/single point of entry system. In cases where these communities encompass an entire Homeless Planning Region (i.e. entitlement regions), the region is not required to develop a Regional Homeless Services Coordination Plan. However, the region will be required to explain how its centralized intake/single point of entry process meets the requirements set forth in the plan content section below.

Planning Process

Regional plans should be created collaboratively, in a meeting or series of meetings, among the regional homeless planning group. Regional leads should be prepared to describe the structure and process for development of regional plans at time of application for funds.

Participants

Groups will be convened by the state-appointed grantee and should include representation of the following, to the extent practicable:

- Each county and local continuum of care within the region;
- Shelters, tenant-based supportive housing, project-based transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing agencies within the region; and
- Service providers, both homeless and mainstream (i.e. ADAMH boards, local Job and Family Services, veterans' services agencies, school systems).

All emergency shelters seeking funding from ODOD through the Homeless Crisis Response Program *must* participate in the planning process and agree to the plan. (Domestic violence shelters are exempt from participation in coordinated intake activities, but should participate in the regional planning process.)

ODOD will offer individualized technical assistance throughout the planning process by request. Based on needs of the region, technical assistance could range from providing examples of forms and policies to meeting facilitation.

Plan Content

Each regional plan must include the following elements:

Inventory of Community Resources

Each region will create an inventory of resources and programs available locally. This includes, but is not limited to, emergency shelters, supportive housing, permanent supportive housing, rental subsidies, and supportive services such as employment programs, mental health and substance abuse counseling and entitlement programs. Inventories should include the name of the program, a brief description of its purpose, target population, summary of eligibility requirements, where services can be accessed and, if possible, an estimate of availability. Cataloging these details into a local inventory will strengthen the community's ability to make appropriate client referrals.

Coordinated Intake and Assessment System

Through use of a coordinated intake and assessment system, communities are better able to consistently assess the needs of individual clients and most effectively match them with the appropriate resources to meet those needs. For purposes of coordinated intake and assessment, service providers are divided into two categories: front door agencies, which include emergency shelters and other agencies administering homelessness prevention programs where persons can directly access homeless crisis response services; and non-front door agencies, which may include project-based transitional, tenant-based supportive and permanent supportive housing providers and other social service agencies where persons may first inquire about homeless services.

Though coordinated intake systems must be locally customized to meet each community's needs, all systems should include the following elements:

1. Common Screening Tool – A common screening tool is a set of very basic questions designed to aid non-front door agencies in making immediate, informed referrals to front door agencies for the purposes of a more detailed assessment. The screening tool should increase the likelihood that persons are being referred for assessment at the most appropriate location in order to decrease the burden placed on persons seeking service. Questions could include, "Do you have children with you?" and "In which county are you currently living?"
2. Common Assessment Tool – Creating a common assessment tool to be used by all front door homeless service providers to determine program eligibility. A common assessment tool ensures that clients are not required to undergo repeated or inconsistent intake processes at multiple locations as they move between different services. By all front door homeless services agencies within a community agreeing to a common intake assessment, a community lays the foundation for adopting a "no wrong door" policy, meaning homeless individuals and families are able to present at any front door homeless service provider within the region, regardless of the provider's available services, complete the common intake process, and then be referred to the appropriate agency for their needs. "No wrong door" policies can significantly reduce the burden placed on homeless individuals and families in identifying on their own which agencies offer appropriate services.

Note: A common assessment tool does not require agencies serving targeted populations to provide services to clients outside of their normal scope. Once potential clients have completed the intake process, they should be referred to other programs for which they are eligible.

3. Referral Process – Regional plans must include a process by which homeless service agencies can refer clients among one another to optimize the clients' access to appropriate services. This process should be designed to provide timely and efficient response, matching the urgent nature of individuals experiencing a housing crisis. Such

a process requires that each agency maintain communication and relationship with other agencies in the system, that they uphold the use of the common assessment tool, and agree to accept the integrity of that assessment when completed at other agencies within the system. The referral process should not be limited only to agencies providing homeless services, but should also include those agencies providing mainstream services and assistance.

4. Diversion Plan – Each time an individual or family applies for emergency shelter, an assessment should be completed before entry to determine the possibility of remaining in their current housing or in an alternative housing arrangement, such as staying with family or friends, even if only temporarily, until a more stable housing solution can be secured. Diversion is not appropriate, however, in instances of domestic violence or where people are literally homeless and have no other safe options. Diversion plans must include how homelessness prevention funds will be used and targeted to persons from entering emergency shelter.

Note: Shelter diversion is not equal to denying shelter entry. Each client should be assessed for diversion options, but where no safe and realistic alternative exists, emergency shelter should be made available.

5. Other Considerations – Regional plans should also include policies or summaries of policies regarding maximum length of stay, discharge protocol, safety measures for serving special needs populations, and targeting and methodologies for street outreach. In the event that individual agencies choose to maintain differing policies on these issues, the policies of all agencies should be recorded and distributed among the regional partners to better inform the intake assessment and the referral process.
6. Prevention and Re-housing – As a region, all partner agencies providing homelessness prevention and re-housing assistance must develop a consistent set of standards for implementation across the region. These standards must address: policies determining what percentage of rent, if any, clients receiving assistance must contribute, and how that amount will be adjusted over time; maximum dollar amounts or months of assistance available to each client; maximum amount of relocation assistance; and policies for determining and prioritizing which eligible individuals and families will receive re-housing assistance.

Creation of a regional plan is an application requirement for the Homeless Crisis Response Program, which replaces the Homeless Assistance Grant Program for program year 2012. These plans must be completed by the September 5, 2012 application deadline. Regions should be prepared to implement plans by the Homeless Crisis Response Program grant period start date of January 1, 2013. ODOD will provide additional guidance and technical assistance throughout this time. To request individualized assistance in the development of a plan, regional leads should contact Jacqui Buschor at 614-466-0201 or Jacqui.Buschor@development.ohio.gov.