



Best Practices to Advance Racial Equity in Coordinated Entry Systems

Background

In 2012, HUD's Continuum of Care (CoC) Program Interim Rule required CoCs to establish a centralized coordinated entry system (CES). More than ten years later, communities across the nation have continued to implement, refine, and strengthen their systems, including exploring steps to eliminate inequities through improved access, assessment tools, and prioritization and referral processes. The impacts of COVID-19 combined with already disproportionate impacts of homelessness on communities of color have emphasized the need for local homeless response systems to center racial equity in CES design and implementation.

This document outlines several established and emerging practices to advance racial equity throughout each element of the CES: access, assessment and prioritization, and referral. Deriving from a recent analysis of 17 community examples, these strategies may serve as a useful reference for communities seeking to strengthen equitable outcomes in their homeless systems of care.

General Strategies

CoCs have meaningful opportunities to advance racial equity by considering their overall processes for designing, evaluating, and improving their CES. Key questions to consider include: who participates in relevant leadership and committee processes, what outcomes are measured, and whose voices are considered in identifying and addressing gaps.

Communities may wish to consider the following strategies in their system design and development:

- ✓ **Meaningful Participation by Diverse Partners:** Ensure that leadership groups, such as CES committees, that help design and monitor the CES include individuals, including BIPOC, with diverse lived experiences of homelessness. Engage partners such as leaders from identity-based mainstream community-based organizations (CBOs) to participate in CES committees and provide feedback on assessments. Support all members of CES leadership groups and committees to have the resources and assistance they need to meaningfully participate. This may include compensation, assistance with travel, opportunities for professional development, technical support with technology, and background information or training on the CES, HUD requirements, and the overall homeless system of care.

- ✓ **Regular Evaluations through a Racial Equity Lens:** Conduct CES evaluations on a regular basis, and at least annually, through a racial equity lens. These processes should include consideration of data to evaluate whether the percentages of individuals receiving CES assessments and permanent housing exits from homelessness are aligned with the overall demographics of homelessness in the community. Qualitative approaches that engage current and former CES participants and providers to provide feedback through identity-based focus groups, interviews, and surveys that include demographic questions are invaluable to understanding the system’s equity strengths and barriers and how it might be exacerbating or helping to address racial disparities in the community.
- ✓ **Effective Strategies to Address Gaps:** Take proactive steps to address the gaps identified through evaluation processes and create accountability through reports to the broader CoC. Engage a diverse array of community partners in addressing gaps, including identity-based CBOs and partners with lived experiences of homelessness. For example, several sample communities that found that their assessments were not addressing racial inequities are now successfully partnering with Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) who have lived experiences of homelessness to develop and pilot alternative wording of assessment questions that will more accurately address racial and ethnic disparities.

Access

“Access” refers to how people experiencing homelessness first learn about CES and connect with someone who can provide an assessment. Access points engage households and gather basic information to determine the best immediate intervention to meet that household’s needs. Access points may include physical destinations such as the offices of community-based direct service providers; outreach teams; co-location with other services such as libraries and benefits offices; in-reach to hospitals and jails; phone services; and other entry points into the system.

Racially equitable access to CES often reflects the following characteristics. The existence or absence of these characteristics can be considered during CES evaluations:

- ✓ **Fair and Equal Access:** Ensure that all people may easily access the CES through a well-known process consisting of different channels, including in person and by phone. Information about CES and where to access it is well disseminated across the community, including identity-based CBOs, faith partners, schools, and other ways to ensure that people in the community who need CES know how to receive an assessment. People accessing the CES should not be steered towards any particular provider or service just because they accessed the system at a particular location.
- ✓ **Cultural Competency:** Ensure that individuals providing assessments are trained in culturally competent and trauma-informed approaches to support gathering accurate information. Communities may consider partnering with people with lived experiences of

homelessness, grassroots organizations, and other partners in developing trainings. Ensure that physical locations are accessible to people with disabilities and reachable by public transportation. Additionally, equip access points to serve people who speak the various languages spoken in the community.

- ✓ **Inclusion of All Subpopulations:** Include and provide assistance to all subpopulations, including people experiencing chronic homelessness, veterans, families, youth, and survivors of domestic violence (DV). Different access points and assessment tools for adults without children, adults with children, unaccompanied youth, and households fleeing DV may be used to better identify subpopulation-specific needs. Partnerships with and referrals from CBOs help ensure the assessment is accessible and widely available to all subpopulations in the community.
- ✓ **Full Coverage:** The CES should cover the CoC's entire geographic area. Large CoCs may consider using separate coordinated entry processes that cover portions of the CoC's geographic area. This strategy may be helpful in cases where geographic barriers discourage people assessed in one area to access assistance in other parts of the community. Communities may consider leveraging Point-in-Time (PIT) count and street outreach data to identify regions that would benefit most from localized access points.

Assessment & Prioritization

HUD requires that CoCs develop a standardized assessment to prioritize people experiencing homelessness in the community for housing and services. Prioritization is the process by which households are ranked and prioritized for services and housing, based on the outcomes of assessment. Prioritization status determines who is referred to housing, with the most vulnerable people being prioritized first based on the community's definition of vulnerability.

Strategies to advance racial equity through assessment and prioritization practices include:

- ✓ **Prioritization Reflecting Vulnerabilities with Disproportionate Impacts:** CoCs can help address racial disparities by prioritizing vulnerabilities that are disproportionately experienced by subpopulations who are experiencing homelessness at higher rates. Some proxies that may be used to reveal these vulnerabilities include eviction history, living in a shelter, living with other families or relatives, frequently moving due to financial reasons, involvement with the criminal legal system, and poor credit history, and can also include geographic area or zip code of an individual's last address.
- ✓ **Consideration of Factors Exacerbating Racial Inequity:** CES planning processes can collect and analyze data to evaluate whether disparities exist and how they appear in the system. Consider intersectional factors (e.g., race, gender, income, education, history of foster care) to determine vulnerability and more fully assess needs and preferences for the most vulnerable subpopulations.
- ✓ **Representative Staffing:** Affirmatively pursue representative staffing and partnering with culturally responsive organizations throughout the CoC region to ensure that the

people administering assessments and services are as reflective of the community as the tools being used. For example, communities can work to define the identities and experiences that should be represented in staffing and update governance policies to include a diversity mechanism to meet staffing goals, while ensuring that decision-makers in this process include BIPOC and people with lived experience of homelessness.

- ✓ **Inclusive Design Processes:** Communities should partner with people with diverse lived experiences of homelessness to develop and pilot alternative assessment questions to minimize re-traumatization and more effectively identify conditions and experiences affecting vulnerability. Design of new assessment questions and prioritization can be informed by holding listening sessions with unhoused and recently housed persons to obtain feedback on the proposed questions and incorporate this feedback into assessment tools and processes. Pilot, evaluate, and continue to fine-tune the questions as needed.
- ✓ **Additional Assessment or Prioritization Criteria:** Examining current assessment and prioritization factors can help communities assess for different vulnerabilities and barriers in order to further promote racial equity. Some examples include employment and economic factors, previous involvement with institutions (e.g., foster care, criminal legal system), education experience and interest, personal history of homelessness or housing instability, and use of services. Additionally, communities should aim to identify and reframe or eliminate stigmatizing questions as much as possible.

Referrals to Permanent Housing

Once a household has been assessed and prioritized, the CES facilitates opportunities for housing referrals and placement. People with the highest determined vulnerability are offered housing and supportive services first. The referral process may include eligibility screening, project vacancies, communication of project vacancies, enrollment, addressing project or client referral rejections, and updating the referral status.

Opportunities for deepening racial equity through the referral process includes consideration of the following strategies:

- ✓ **Referral Protocols That Limit Bias:** Programs participating in the CES accept all eligible referrals unless the CoC has a written protocol for rejecting referrals and ensures that these rejections are justified and rare. Referral protocols should include options for accessing and participating in another available program.
- ✓ **Person-Centered Approach:** Taking a person-centered approach to referrals preserves client self-determination and ensures potential program participants have choices that meet their housing preferences (e.g., location and type of housing, types of services). Support clients in selecting the best available housing option to meet their needs. Some communities have raised concerns about their ability to make referrals that also comply with Fair Housing regulations, especially when considering racial

equity. To address this, a common practice is to provide potential project participants with all housing and service options that are applicable to them and provide support in selecting an option.

- ✓ **Address Referral Wait Times:** If the appropriate resource or housing intervention is unavailable, people with highest level of need should be offered other appropriate resources identified by the CoC. It is recommended that the CoC apply this approach to all housing project component types and offer targeted technical assistance to build capacity and support programs in lowering barriers to permanent housing.

Resources

HUD offers various resources and community highlights to support communities to advance racial equity in their homeless response and CES. Below are several resources that could be helpful to local efforts.

- [HUD Exchange Racial Equity Webpage](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Advancing Racial Equity through Assessments and Prioritization](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Rehousing Activation and Racial Equity](#)
- [SNAPS Coordinated Entry Equity Demonstration: Cohort 1 Impact and Evaluation Report](#)
- [SNAPS Coordinated Entry Equity Demonstration: Cohort 2 Information Packet](#)
- [SNAPS Coordinated Entry Equity Demonstration: Understanding Experiences of Black Clients Using Pierce County CES](#)

For additional support or questions on how to approach racial equity work within your community or organization, please contact Homebase's Racial Equity Action and Coordination Team (REACT) at react@homebaseccc.org.