

**CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO’S NAVIGATION CENTER:
APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED TO A SMALL COUNTY SYSTEM**

Andrea Banks

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Housing is the most important intervention to protect homeless individuals against high rates of morbidity and mortality. Due to conditions shaped by housing legislation and funding, communities across the country are shifting homeless system efforts toward permanent housing strategies. As Napa County redesigns its own shelter system, it is considering best practices to low-barrier “Housing First” approaches to service.

The Navigation Center is a program designed to rapidly house San Francisco’s most-difficult-to-serve homeless individuals. It has been successful engaging and serving clients with significant barriers to housing by lowering the access threshold, creating a welcoming atmosphere, and providing rapid housing case management.

Although there are considerable differences in the homeless landscapes of the two communities, there are many shared challenges. This case study examines the lessons learned by the Navigation Center in San Francisco and how they might inform current Napa County homeless system redesign efforts.

CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO'S NAVIGATION CENTER: APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED TO A SMALL COUNTY SYSTEM

Introduction

Chronic homelessness is a community issue that has implications for individual and population health. Undoubtedly, differences in exposure and opportunity can lead to differences in health outcomes and life expectancy for homeless populations. Homelessness and the health and wellness of homeless individuals are closely interlinked. For example: homeless individuals are three to six times more likely to become ill. Additionally, the average life expectancy for the homeless population is estimated between 42 and 52 years, compared to 78 years in the general population.

Housing First models recognize that housing is a vital first step towards providing people with stability, security, and improved health and wellness. This model prioritizes housing for the most vulnerable homeless individuals within a harm reduction approach. Once connected to housing, individuals are assisted through case management in accessing services and supports necessary to maintain long term stability. This approach has been shown to be effective even with individuals who are chronically homeless and have serious barriers to stable housing.

Current political and legislative conditions, including the HEARTH Act and HUD funding requirements, have created opportunities to transform homeless services into systems that prevent homelessness and move those that do experience homelessness into permanent housing quickly.

Background

The Napa County Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data shows that there is a large growing subset of individuals who are chronically homeless, have severe mental illness (SMI), issues with substance abuse, chronic health problems, and three or more co-occurring disorders. A number of programs in Napa, particularly in the shelter system, continue to follow a “Housing Ready” approach wherein entry is restrictive. The majority of the shelters in the system significantly limit admission (e.g. require clients to be “clean and sober”) and have limited hours of access. These restrictions create barriers to housing, particularly for chronically homeless individuals who are most vulnerable.

To compound the issues, Napa has a major shortage in the availability of permanent supportive housing and is unable to meet the demand of a growing population of chronic homeless individuals. Homeless service providers are reporting that it is becoming increasingly difficult to move homeless individuals into housing. HMIS data also suggests that a majority of individuals are exiting the shelter system into non-permanent interventions or destinations.

The County and City of Napa are working with the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) and the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) on a comprehensive evaluation of existing homeless systems and programs. The range of recommendations and strategies from CSH and NAEH fall into the following categories: Breaking Silos & Leveraging Resources, Cutting Costs & Realigning Resources, Prioritizing Housing Resources, Building Housing Capacity, and Using Data.

This study will look at lessons learned by the Navigation Center in San Francisco and how those may inform Napa County within the context of the current system redesign efforts.

Key Elements of the Navigation Center

The City and County of San Francisco began operating the Navigation Center, a new program designed to rapidly house San Francisco's most-difficult-to-serve homeless population, in March of 2015. The Navigation Center is a partnership of the Mayor's Office of Housing and Opportunity, Partnerships and Engagement (HOPE), the Human Services Agency (HSA), the Department of Public Health (DPH) and non-profit partners. This collaborative partnership has played a key role in reducing systemic barriers to housing in the Navigation Center model.

The Navigation Center provides shelter for up to 75 individuals while receiving rapid housing case management services. The center is located at an unused school site and is comprised of dormitory style "bungalows." The site also includes shower and bathroom facilities, laundry facilities, counseling/case management offices, a 24-hour dining room, a common courtyard, animal exercise space, and sufficient storage for individual's belongings.

The Navigation Center's primary goal is to link individuals to permanent housing, a contrast to the experience had by many in the traditional shelter system. The Navigation Center has a low threshold for entry and, once enrolled, individuals can come and go at will, using any common space at any time of the day. By reducing barriers to entry, the Navigation Center has successfully engaged a population that has historically avoided traditional shelters due to material and psychological barriers. Some other barriers addressed by this approach are referred to as "the three P's" and include:

- Pets – The Navigation Center accommodates pets and assists clients in the process to apply for companion animal designation when needed.
- Possessions –The Navigation Center stores large and small items so individuals are able to engage in the program knowing that their belongings are safe and accounted for.
- Partners and Groups – The Navigation Center has mixed-gender dorms that allow clients to maintain personal and community bonds.

Although early in the pilot, this model has shown success in that 65% of individuals have exited to permanent housing (excluding Homeward Bound program exits), 7% to temporary housing with a housing maintenance rate of 98%.

Lessons Learned and Implications for Napa’s Homeless System Redesign

While Napa has a relatively high population of chronic homeless individuals, the homeless landscape is significantly different than one finds in San Francisco. Opening a separate Navigation Center would not be the best way to serve the Napa County community. Rather, the recommendation made by CSH and NAEH to create a system that implements the Housing First approach throughout all interventions is the most effective approach for Napa. This includes *re-designing the emergency shelters to be the “front door” into a low-barrier and housing-focused crisis response system*. With that said, the differences in the backdrop do not preclude the identification of common challenges and finding opportunities to learn from the lessons of the Navigation Center pilot.

Lowering the Threshold

One of the successes of the Navigation Center is its effective engagement of clients who have previously rejected the shelter system. Napa would benefit from looking at if and why unsheltered individuals within Napa have avoided shelters and develop Napa-specific strategies to engage that population.

Many recognized a lenient program structure and a welcoming environment as fundamental program elements. Environments where individuals are treated with respect and are not subjected to rigid rules typical of shelters afford a feeling of comfort, independence and reduced anxiety. This more lenient program structure added an unexpected benefit to the surrounding community as well. The “spillover” that can happen due to shelter operations (e.g. meal time, check-in time) does not occur at the Navigation Center.

If the shelter system in Napa County transitions to something that mirrors some aspects of the Navigation Center, with reduced barriers to entry and 24-hour access, planners should look at the capacity of Napa’s shelter to function within this new model. Moving to 24-hours access, serving clients with significant barriers to housing and addressing higher case management needs will require appropriate staffing and skillset for the changing level of service and need.

Increase Exit Capacity

Navigation Center does well in regards to rapid exits into permanent supportive housing. This will not work in Napa County without sufficient permanent supportive housing inventory into which homeless individuals can be placed rapidly.

As Napa County moves forward with the current strategies to integrate community homeless services (too often in siloes) and funding streams and to leverage additional resources, the challenge of sufficient supportive housing inventory should be somewhat alleviated. The collaborative funding structure and the creation of a Flexible Housing Subsidy Pool, paired with a coordinated entry process, will allow a strategic approach to managing housing resources to better meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

San Francisco HSA has prioritized housing options for Navigation Center clients to facilitate rapid exits. While this has accelerated success for Navigation Center clients, it has the potential to create competition with other homeless programs for existing housing options. While this will ideally be addressed through the coordinated entry process in development, it is worth keeping this potential for competing priorities on the radar.

Collaboration

The City and County of San Francisco has done an effective job at developing partnerships between the various public sector stakeholders and the non-profit operators. Involving all of the stakeholders, including operational staff and case managers, in the planning process was identified as a key reason the pilot has been so successful. As with any collaborative, differing priorities and outcome desires has surfaced by the various stakeholders in San Francisco and was identified as an area to better define. These differing perspectives have the potential to create competing program goals. The following insightful observations given by the Office of the Controller show that homelessness is a complex issue that can impact stakeholders in very different ways:

- *Ensuring that Navigation Center clients are efficiently housed in the first available placement emerged as an important HSA motivation.*
- *Exit type and appropriateness emerged as an important motivation for Navigation Center case managers/staff.*
- *Maximizing the ratio of stable to unstable program exits emerged as an important HOPE motivation.*
- *Exit speed (and rapid program throughput) emerged as an important motivation for San Francisco Police Department and Department of Public Works.*

As Napa moves into a more linked collaborative approach to funding and programming, it will be important to clearly outline desired outcomes and establish performance metrics to avoid operational differences between stakeholders.

San Francisco County noted in several reports that serving heavily addicted clients has been a challenge. This challenge has impacted client engagement and presented challenges in balancing individual and community rights within the Navigation Center. Due to Napa County's scale, the integrated structure of our Health and Human Services Agency, and the already existing collaborative relationships between public and private sector providers, Napa has an amazing opportunity to not only house individuals rapidly, but also to provide early support to improve long term housing stability. The connections that already exist between Napa's networks of invested stakeholders would be difficult to replicate in larger communities. It is recommended that Napa County consider early on in the new system design process what other interventions

would add value to the clients while helping to maintain a stable shelter community and environment (e.g. harm-reduction-oriented substance abuse support, life skills training, etc.)

Quality Staff and Program Components

Focused case management with onsite housing services and warm hand-offs to other services is the foundation of the success of the Navigation Center. Napa County should ensure that there are high quality operational and management staff who are knowledgeable and dedicated to maintaining the welcoming and supportive environment in place. Additionally, as a point of caution, San Francisco's operational staff grapple with balancing the competing roles of case manager and advocate. To avoid roll confusion, Napa County will need to clearly define the expectations of case manager role.

Finally, it is clear that a percentage of individuals are unable or unwilling to engage in the level of case management offered in the Navigation Center model. For Napa County's system to become a program that is inclusive of the most vulnerable, it will be important to build in alternatives for clients whose barriers interfere with the client's ability to participate in the housing process including client engagement, immigration status, and/or criminal justice involvement.

Cost

Cost and resource needs will largely depend on decisions made as Napa County goes through the system redesign process; they will depend on which elements are adopted in the "front door" approach. It was noted that the cost difference was approximately 52% higher for the Navigation

Center compared to the average “per bed per day” cost of other shelters funded by HSA. This higher cost is attributed to higher case management and on-site services, the capacity of the site (a relatively small facility), and a 24-hour operational schedule.

Conclusion

Napa County is at the beginning of system change with real potential to decrease, if not end, homelessness in the Napa community. The major redesign of the homeless systems in Napa presents an amazing opportunity to incorporate lessons from systems outside of Napa. After this review of San Francisco County’s Navigation Center, it is recommended that Napa County:

- Establish Napa-specific strategies to engage unsheltered individuals if necessary
- Determine capacity to operate higher levels of service and need
- Agree on outcomes and performance metrics to avoid differences between stakeholders
- Determine which interventions would add value to individual and shelter community
- Mitigate the potential of competition for existing housing inventory
- Ensure high quality staff and clearly define expectations and roles
- Build in alternatives for clients whose barriers interfere with participation

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to the City and County of San Francisco Human Services Department for hosting this opportunity and to all of the individuals in Napa County that offered their time and support during this case study. My deepest appreciation goes to:

San Francisco City and County

John Murray, Senior Planning Analyst and BASSC Liaison, Human Services Agency (HSA)

Scott W. Walton, Manager, Adult Services Housing and Homeless Division, HSA

Julie Leadbetter, Director San Francisco Navigation Center, Mayor's Office of H.O.P.E.

Napa County

Howard Himes, Director, Napa County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA)

Mitch Wippern, Assistant Deputy Director, Napa County HHSA, Operations

Linda S. Powers, Program Director, Shelter Services, Community Action of Napa Valley

Danielle Wildkress, Associate Director, Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH)

References

More than a Shelter: An Assessment of the Navigation Center's First Six Months, City and
County of San Francisco, Office of the Controller, 12/10/2015

Perspectives from the Navigation Center, Reports #1-4, City and County of San Francisco,
Office of the Controller, 11/4/2015 through 12/2/2015

CSH and NAEH Recommendation Report, The County and City of Napa, CA

PHA 5-Year and Annual Plan, Housing Authority City of Napa, 2015-2020

Health Care and Homelessness, Published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, July 2009