

PATHWAYS HOME: A PLAN TO END HOMELESSNESS IN LA CROSSE



January 8, 2024



LA CROSSE COUNTY

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Executive Summary

Pathways Home is the result of a new partnership between the City of La Crosse and La Crosse County. Our goal is to achieve Functional Zero in the City of La Crosse within the next five years.

Achieving Functional Zero would mean any instances of homelessness are rare and brief, and the availability of services and resources matches or exceeds demand within our community. To reach our goal, leaders at the City and County have recognized a need for improved performance in our existing homelessness response system.

Better coordination, improved use of data, measurable goals, and consistent leadership are needed. Historically, there has been no defined local government role in homelessness response in La Crosse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a large increase in people experiencing homelessness in our community, the City and the County began to allocate significant resources to address the problem. However, despite increased funding, the number of people experiencing homelessness remains unacceptably high. Services are fragmented, and public frustration has grown.

“Better coordination, improved use of data, measurable goals, and consistent leadership are needed”

This plan brings together existing resources and new strategies to effectively combat homelessness. This means improving the supply of short-term supportive and other housing options. It means more targeted and coordinated case management informed by data. We have studied what has worked in other cities and counties and will apply that learning here. Input has been gathered from local agencies who will continue to do great work on the ground while benefitting from better coordination. Close collaboration with those agencies is key to the success of this initiative. Every step we take as part of this project will be carefully evaluated and we will report our progress to the public. Our aim is to ensure Functional Zero is not a one-time achievement, but a sustained reality.

Key Takeaways

- 1. Coordinated, Consistent Leadership:** This plan will be led by the City and County of La Crosse, offering consistency, accountability, and greater coordination as we drive toward a common goal.
- 2. Real-Time Data:** We will adopt best practices around use of data, including developing a real-time list of people experiencing homelessness to pool and target resources efficiently.
- 3. Dedicated City-County Staffing:** A newly hired County Homelessness System Manager and the City of La Crosse-supported Homelessness Services Coordinator will form the “backbone” of the integrated system. This will harness the power of local nonprofits, freeing them to focus on the work they do best. Additionally, a specialized unit will be created at La Crosse County Human Services to provide case management and treatment coordination to certain recently housed individuals.
- 4. Maximize Housing Opportunities:** State/federal funding for housing is currently being left on the table due to a lack of units and coordination. The plan will work to address this key issue.
- 5. Functional Zero by 2029:** Moving people into housing will be the central focus of this plan. All efforts will align around the goal of achieving Functional Zero in La Crosse by 2029.

Background - How We Got Here

La Crosse saw a significant increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various short-term federal funding streams were used during the pandemic to address the problem, although these often took the form of temporary fixes. For example, federal funding channeled through the County and City was used to shelter people at motels over the winters of 2020 and 2021. With increased investment by the City and the County, came increased responsibility. However, despite higher funding, the number of people experiencing homelessness has remained stubbornly high, fueling public frustration.

As we begin 2024, there are approximately 220 individuals without children and 20 households with children who are homeless in La Crosse County*. Many homeless people do find housing with support from our current system, but overall numbers remain elevated, particularly the number of unsheltered individuals, compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response, and to ensure public funding is being used effectively and sustainably, leadership at the City and County united around the need for a new approach. The key elements of that approach were to put local government in a leadership role, while drawing on successes from other communities and local input.

*Estimated, based on quantitative and qualitative sources.

Defining Homelessness

A person who lacks a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” is defined as homeless by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The definition includes four broad categories of homelessness.

- 1 People who are living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting an institution where they temporarily resided.
- 2 People who are losing their primary nighttime residence, which may include a motel or hotel or a doubled up situation, within 14 days and lack resources or support networks to remain in housing.
- 3 Families with children or unaccompanied youth who are unstably housed and likely to continue in that state. This applies to families with children or unaccompanied youth who have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in the last 60 or more days, have had two or more moves in the last 60 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed because of disability or multiple barriers to employment.
- 4 People who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, have no other residence, and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

Source: Changes in the HUD Definition of "Homeless" - National Alliance to End Homelessness

How this Plan was Developed



Pathways Home was developed using stakeholder input from agencies working on the ground in La Crosse, from people with lived experiences, and through learning from successes and failures in other communities.

A Coordinating Team of City and County staff led the process. Three meeting groups were organized to gather input from local agencies and people with lived experience. These were the Prevention, Crisis Response and Outflow groups. Each group had

between 15 and 27 participants and had three meetings to analyze the current state of homelessness in La Crosse, envision a desired future state, and finally develop strategies to bridge the gap between current and future state.

Across the three groups, consensus emerged around a need for greater system coordination. The groups also developed “future statements” that defined a vision for the future state of homelessness response in our community. The future statements from the groups are listed below.

Prevention

- People have supports to maintain housing.
- Resources are easy to navigate and empower people.
- Everyone has sustainable, safe, affordable, and accessible housing.

Crisis Response

- La Crosse services are housing focused.
- There are safe and appropriate housing or shelter options to offer immediately.
- Crises are met with an effective response.

Outflow

- Specialized housing capacity and supports to help everyone get into housing is in place.
- Housing options that meet everyone’s needs are available.
- La Crosse has a multitude of supportive services to help people thrive.
- La Crosse has caring connections to offer everyone support in housing.

The overarching desired future state was to achieve Functional Zero, meaning a La Crosse where homelessness would be rare and brief and sufficient housing options exist to meet the community’s needs.

The Coordinating Team also researched successful models used by other communities with particular attention paid to the Built for Zero model, developed by Community Solutions, a New York-based nonprofit. Built for Zero’s adoption by multiple jurisdictions offers an opportunity to view common steps taken to produce successful outcomes. A Lived Experience Team also brought its own ideas throughout the process and worked with the Coordinating Team in finalizing the plan.

Built for Zero Common Steps

Fourteen communities in the U.S. have achieved Functional Zero using the Built for Zero model, which is the foundation for this plan. To build a homelessness response system ready for success, these four changes are key.

- 1. Creating a shared definition of the right end state:** City, County, and agency partners align around Functional Zero as our goal.
- 2. Assembling an accountable, community-wide team:** Homelessness response is fragmented. Local government leadership will help to break down silos and develop a unified approach.
- 3. Using real-time data, which accounts for everyone by name and need:** Achieving real-time, person-specific data is a necessary step for driving toward Functional Zero.
- 4. Targeted, data-driven housing investments:** Efficient and strategic investments in housing that is connected to our real-time data.

Further reading:

- [Opinion | Houston Shows How to Tackle Homelessness - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)
- [Rockford, Illinois: Functional Zero Case Study - Community Solutions](#)
- [Milwaukee Is Close to Ending Family Homelessness. Here's How. | United States Interagency Council on Homelessness \(usich.gov\)](#)

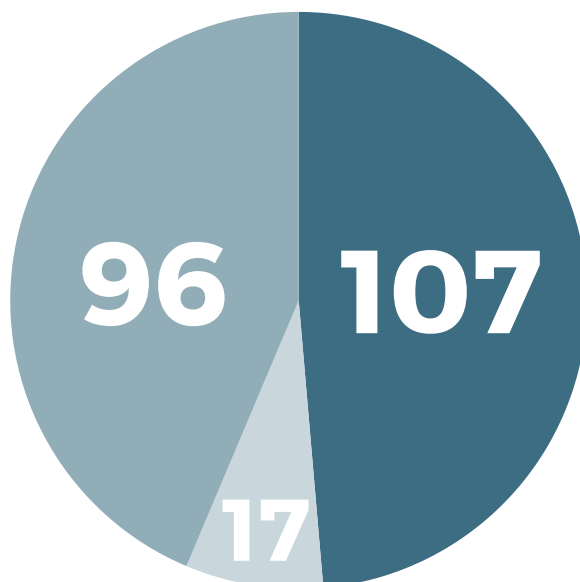
Issues Faced by Homeless Individuals*

20-25%
have severe mental
health problems

26%
have chronic substance
use disorder

22%
are chronically/
long-term homeless

Estimated Additional Specialized Housing Needs for La Crosse**



- 107 - Rapid Rehousing with Intensive Case Management
- 96 - Permanent Supportive Housing
- 17 - Rapid Rehousing

*[National Alliance to End Homelessness, Psychology Today, National Coalition for the Homeless](#)

**Coulee CoC January 2024 Homeless Data

The “Great Eight” Action Pathways to Functional Zero

The starting point to developing strategies to achieve Functional Zero for the Coordinating Team was to clearly define problems and possibilities with the current system.

Areas of concern include the underutilization of rental support and housing programs. Broadly speaking, this means there are federal and state funded housing vouchers and rental supports available to our community that are being left on the table. The primary cause for this gap is a lack of housing units to match to those programs and in some instances a disconnect between housing and homelessness services.

“The consistent leadership and accountability that the City and County’s partnership can provide will be crucial”

Another issue repeatedly identified in the work of developing this plan is a deficit of specialized housing capacity and insufficient case management. A variety of housing options are required to reduce homelessness, including different kinds of supportive housing.

The County’s behavioral health program has been an underutilized resource that could improve case management for people experiencing homelessness. This plan will seek to more clearly connect that resource to the homeless response.

Many of the strategies outlined here involve refocusing or better utilizing existing resources. Increased coordination will go a long way in maximizing current resources, while ensuring additional investments are prioritized and used most effectively to achieve Functional Zero. While the City and County are making significant contributions in staffing, infrastructure and other resources to make this plan successful, tax levy caps limit what assistance can be provided by local government alone.

Each of the strategies developed in this section is a piece of the puzzle that together can achieve a new and more effective future state for our homelessness response system. The strategies are the result of input from agencies, City and County staff, the homeless community, and are inspired by approaches from Built for Zero and related research. For these strategies to be successful, the consistent leadership and accountability that the City and County’s partnership can provide will be crucial, along with coordinated investments from local charitable organizations.



1. Build the System

Definition

Leadership, structure, support, policies and practices will exist so homelessness response for La Crosse functions as one highly efficient and effective integrated system. The following should be present:

- A comprehensive plan
- Alignment on roles, responsibilities, and goals
- Improved mechanisms for case and referral coordination
- Effective use of data (for case response, performance monitoring and system strategy)
- Coordination so that funding and resources are used efficiently
- Backbone structure (accountable leadership from the City and County)
- Consistent training (including dynamics of poverty training)
- Input from people with lived experiences is used across the system

Strategies

1. Implement the “Built for Zero” methodology:
 - a. By-name list
 - b. Command center team
 - c. Case conferencing
2. Leverage City and County leadership and infrastructure for backbone coordination and support. This will include:
 - a. County Homelessness System Manager
 - b. City Homelessness Services Coordinator
 - c. Supports from other City and County departments
3. Partner with local philanthropic organizations to develop one or more specific community funds for homelessness response
4. Create a community data dashboard, including system performance measures

Potential Starting Points

- Case conferencing
- Emergency family sheltering practices
- Community data team and dashboard
- Coordinated Entry List



2. Close the Housing Gap

Definition

Abundant specialized housing capacity should exist to meet the unique need of all homeless individuals and families.

Strategies

1. Utilize a combination of the following to boost specialized housing capacity
 - a. City or agency held leases (private sector)
 - b. Agency owned properties (non-profit)
 - c. New development partnerships (private or non-profit)
2. Improve coordination with Public Housing Authorities
3. Maximize opportunities through City and County Planning Departments
4. Expand supply of affordable housing
5. Landlord engagement strategies

Potential Starting Points

- Current agency held leasing operations
- La Crosse County Thriving Families program
- Landlord Mitigation Program

3. End the Encampments

Definition

It is neither humane nor safe for people to live in encampments if other housing or shelter options are available. We will restore and maintain legal norms and public standards related to outdoor camping.

Strategies

1. Explore a “bridge” where shelter capacity is surged as a short-term pathway to more permanent housing
2. Coordinate transition of individuals in camps to shelter or housing
3. No longer permit outdoor camping that violates laws and ordinances as an option for unhoused individuals or families

Potential Starting Points

- Prior local “sprints” (e.g. the successful 100-day effort to end homelessness for local veterans)
- Family Promise (Monroe County)
- Local church interest in assisting with sheltering

4. Provide the Necessary Case Management

Definition

Sufficient case management capacity will be developed at a continuum of intensities to meet what every unhoused individual and family needs to be successful in housing.

Through case management, all individuals and families are connected with a well-coordinated service array that meets their unique needs.

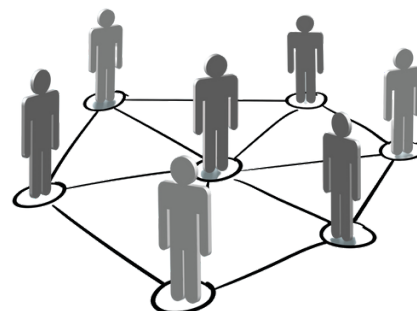
Note: This will also create more housing opportunities as private sector landlords are more open to renting when knowing there is adequate case management.

Strategies

1. Specialization and potential expansion of La Crosse County behavioral health services
2. Identification of roles, coordination mechanisms and best practices throughout the continuum of housing-related case management programs
3. Create access to flexible funds to wrap around state and federal funding
4. Maintain a map of housing-related programs and common wraparound services
5. Maximize & explore scaling up the following programs:
 - a. Permanence Supportive Housing (PSH)
 - b. Tenant Based Rental Assistance (TBRA)
 - c. Rapid Re-Housing
 - d. Section 8 Vouchers
 - e. Other HUD-related vouchers not currently being received by the community
6. Identify and prioritize service caps and strategies related to connecting to and maintaining housing (i.e., SUD and MH residential)

Potential Starting Points

- County Behavioral Health programs (Comprehensive Community Services and Community Support Program)
- Local Permanent Supportive Housing Programs (PSH)
- Family Care MCOs
- Statewide Residential SUD programs
- New Horizon's Rapid Rehousing



5. Shore-up Prevention

Definition

Preventing individuals and families from losing current housing. Preserving local resources for local residents.

Strategies

1. Create mechanisms for efficient connections to resources (i.e. “No Wrong Door”) and diversion
2. Create a “living” resource map so service providers and clients know existing resources
3. Prevention Practice Standards - standardized programmatic guidance for the delivery of homelessness prevention assistance
4. Increase coordination with the courts and other parts of the system related to eviction prevention.
5. Strengthen eviction prevention programs and processes
6. Create more coordination and support related to discharge planning (including medically fragile individuals)
7. Increase communication and coordination with other counties referring to La Crosse County resources
8. Targeted homelessness prevention for at-risk geographies and populations.
9. Review and clarify residency requirements

Potential Starting Points

- REACH Center
- Public Health Programs
- Community Navigation Programs
- 211
- Eviction Defense Program
- La Crosse Area Family Collaborative
- Total Navigation Team
- Landlord Liaison



6. Re-Imagine Outreach

Definition

The City of La Crosse will have a housing-focused homelessness response system with resources substantially geared toward supporting individuals in housing and shelter (when needed). There is an urgent and effective crisis response assisting persons who have lost housing.

Strategies

1. Create a mechanism and practice template for “rapid response” where unsheltered individuals are immediately offered a housing or shelter option
2. Create after-hours response options
3. Ensure there are low barrier shelter options
4. Explore “one-stop shop” approaches
5. Optimize case conferencing practices
6. Create mechanisms for efficient connections to shelter and housing
7. Ensure accessibility to services is not limited by language, disability or health status

Potential Starting Points

- Independent Living Resources (ILR) Outreach Workers
- Lutheran Social Services Gaining Ground Program
- La Crosse County Mental Health Crisis Response & Co-Response Program
- REACH Center
- Homeless Outreach Team (H.O.T)



7. Ignite & Align Caring Connections

Definition

Ensuring that relational and emotional support options are available to everyone experiencing homelessness.

Strategies

1. Increase the availability and strategic use of peer supports throughout the system
2. Create an outreach strategy to welcome faith and other grass roots programs as effective partners
3. Optimize use of natural support systems

Potential Starting Points

- Lived Experience Team
- Neighbors to Neighbors pilot program
- Recovery Avenue (RAVE)
- The Center: 7 Rivers LGBTQ Connection
- Place of Grace
- Adult Teen Challenge
- Next Chapter

8. Calibrate the Justice System

Definition

Ensure best practices are in place to effectively and humanely respond to homeless individuals entering the justice system.

Strategies

1. Increase the level of ongoing communication and coordination regarding homelessness responses among justice system partners
2. Leverage the La Crosse County Criminal Justice Management Council (CJMC)

Potential Starting Points

- Criminal Justice Management Council
- Wisconsin Deflection Initiative

Implementation

Implementation of this plan will begin immediately in 2024.

Specific strategies have been prioritized into four lines of effort (LOEs). The LOEs will provide focus and timelines as implementation starts. Several City and County staff will serve as implementation leads to drive results across the LOEs.



01

Build the System

Stand up the key elements of system integration and performance monitoring.



02

Create Capacity

Put in place the specialized housing and case management capacity required to meet service needs.



03

Ignite Caring Connections

Harness the compassion of the community, building in relational elements that are essential for healing, recovery and emotional well-being.



04

End the Camps

Move with urgency to end the homeless encampments, which are an intolerable health and public safety risk. This will be done thoughtfully and humanely as housing/shelter capacity is expanded.

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PATHWAYS HOME: AN INTEGRATED AND COMPASSIONATE APPROACH TO ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN LA CROSSE

“Our aim is to ensure Functional Zero
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sustained reality.”

Learn more...

lacrossecounty.org/homelessness-plan



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