

# Continuum of Care Plan

2023-2026



**OCALA/MARION COUNTY JOINT OFFICE ON HOMELESSNESS: COC FL-514**



## Background

The 2023-2026 CoC Plan, continues to rely heavily, but not exclusively on the recommendations of two studies conducted on the state of homelessness in the Ocala/Marion County community. *The Long Way Home* was completed by the Public Policy Institute and *Ending Homelessness in Marion County* was produced by the Florida Housing Coalition. Both studies included findings and recommendations centered on strengthening and improving the capacity of the Lead Agency, the Board of Governors, social service agencies addressing homelessness as well as infrastructure and procedures to support the homeless service system.

The Lead Agency and HMIS Lead roles transitioned to the City/County Joint Office on Homelessness three years ago. Unfortunately, those three years were marked by COVID and significant staff turnover that hampered the ability of the transition to take place smoothly and quickly. That transition is complete and the Joint Office as well as the homeless services system as a whole is now building its capacity. The recommendations from the studies mentioned above have been aligned with the HUD Strategic Plan and NOFO priorities. The purpose of this plan is to lay out goals and strategies for the next three years, document accomplishments and identify next steps for growth.

The Continuum of Care membership has demonstrated its commitment to improving the system of care that serves homeless individuals and families. With nearly 50 membership organizations and an increasing level of engagement, the understanding of the homeless services system as a whole and the abilities of the system are growing. Partnering for progress will be the hallmark of continuum of Care's future.

## Creating a Systemic Response to Homelessness

The City/County Joint Office on Homelessness was launched in July, 2020. The County serves as the Lead Agency/Collaborative Applicant. The City serves as the HMIS Lead, performs Coordinated Entry and oversees the PIT/HIC Counts.

Data quality issues and difficulties creating required reporting were identified within the HMIS system, Charity Tracker, through system performance measure testing in February of 2021. In 2022, the CoC committed to transitioning to a new HMIS platform that will better meet the CoC's needs and facilitate required reporting to HUD and other funders. The transition to the new platform commenced in 2023. In addition to getting the new platform in place and performing the required data migration, end user training was conducted. Additional training will be required for end users and new staff are hired.

The Lead Agency has completed numerous site visits, conducted interviews with funded projects, and fostered collaboration. As Lead Agency staff meet with subrecipients to execute the new 2023/2024 contracts, a more thorough orientation process will be used to review the contract and make sure that the expectations and requirements of the contract are understood. Additionally, revised and standardized forms will be provided to bring consistency across programs as well as to ensure accuracy and compliance. These efforts have had limited success in the past and the effort will be redoubled in 2023 to streamline the reporting and monitoring processes.

#### Next Steps:

- Launch of new HMIS platform.
- Complete ongoing data clean up and address any newly identified training needs with providers on data quality issues.
- As data issues are addressed, establish benchmarks for targeted performance improvement.
- Create an emphasis and alignment between projects and performance.
- More comprehensive on-boarding of new subrecipients.
- Enhanced record retention to aide in contract reporting and monitoring.
- Regular review of policies and procedures with current subrecipients.

In 2022/2023 the Board of Governors has been expanded from fourteen to twenty members. This has included the addition of key connections with employment organizations, large property management companies, as well as stronger connections to the business community. The Board has also experienced higher levels of engagement and attendance among its existing members.

Board member orientation content was created which includes the history of the CoC, an overview of the regulatory responsibilities, program components, and more. A meet and greet event was held to provide a forum for the serving members to engage with one another.

The Governance Charter was reviewed, updated and approved in early 2023.

#### Next Steps:

- Assess Board of Governor representation and involvement on committees.
- Creating a higher level of committee engagement, thus strengthening the CoC leadership.
- Developing a Board of Governors scorecard to assess and track Board performance.
- Determining and maintaining Board terms based on Board start dates, thus following and enforcing Board term limits outlined in the Governance Charter.

## Organizing and Delivering Services More Effectively

### Expand Outreach

Both the City of Ocala and SMA Healthcare have established outreach teams. For a period of time, County ESG funds supported an outreach position at Interfaith Emergency Services. That funding has ended and the position is no longer active.

While the existing outreach services meet the vast majority of community need, there are still some pockets that require expanded outreach services. Most notably this would include “after hours” outreach services to connect individuals to services on nights and weekends.

Next Steps:

- Expand outreach services to fill gaps in the current outreach efforts.
- Create outreach resources that provide services on nights and weekends.

### **Expand Case Management**

Case management is a critical component in getting families rehoused as well as assisting them in maintaining housing. Through the CoC multiple organizations receive funding for case management. Those organizations include St. Theresa’s Social Services, Interfaith Emergency Services, Shepherd’s Lighthouse, Saving Mercy Corporation and the Ocala Housing Authority. Training was provided to understand the eligible case management activities and tracking so providers can adequately bill for those expenses, as well as to create alignment and documentation in HMIS. There remain weaknesses in the reporting and documenting of some providers. This needs to be an area of focus as the CoC moves forward.

In 2022 the Resource and Referral Committee was launched which serves as a forum for multi-disciplinary case review and referral coordination. Case managers may bring forward challenging cases to obtain input and ideas from other case managers and service providers in order to develop a strong housing stability plan. Not only does this foster cooperation and leverage knowledge and insights, it also creates a focus on performance measures outlined in the project charter; length of time homeless, returns to homelessness, and increase in income and benefits for system stayers and leavers.

Written standards are in place, but need to be reviewed and updated to include system performance measures as well as documentation forms and samples for ease and to promote consistency.

Next Steps:

- Review written standards, file documentation and forms with subrecipients to ensure appropriate record keeping and consistency.
- Connect with mental health providers to strengthen coordination of services.

### **Create Central Access Point/Day Shelter**

Interfaith Emergency Services Engagement Center has been moving forward and has completed the design phase. Construction is scheduled to start in 2023. This facility will expand services offered to the homeless population by being a hub for wraparound services such as; laundry, showers, mental health, medical services, legal records/identification needs and employment opportunities.

Next Steps:

- Construction of the Engagement Center in late 2023/2024

## **Expanding Coordination and Partnership of Supportive Services at the Local Level**

### **Strengthen Coordinated Entry Process to Increase Utilization**

The Coordinated Entry process is being better understood by local homeless service providers. There is better usage of the by-name list for Rapid Rehousing services. Coordination among providers and understanding of HUD and DCF policies has improved creating better program performance and compliance with written policies.

Next Steps:

- Continue providing technical assistance to ESG and CoC providers on properly using Coordinated Entry and closing side doors.

## **Use Evidence-Based Approaches**

### **Expand Use of Best Practices**

The ESG written standards are currently being revised to include language and forms that reinforce HUD regulations, guidelines and to promote ease with file documentation and compliance.

We have the opportunity to provide education and awareness to the Continuum on the specifics of permanent supportive housing. Seek opportunities to expand the availability of permanent supportive housing and the accompanying wrap around services.

Next Steps:

- Update and finalize the ESG written standards.
- Work with Shangri La and Step Up on 2<sup>nd</sup> on the opportunity to increase the number of permanent supportive housing units.

### **Identify Available Units for Rapid Rehousing Referrals**

A housing locator position existed through ESG CARES funding. This position no longer exists but the need it was designed to meet remains. There is a need to conduct outreach and engagement with



landlords and property owners to identify housing units that can be used in the rapid rehousing program to get families rehoused.

Next Steps:

- Aligning properties previously supported with affordable housing dollars with the CoC in order to fill vacancies through coordinated entry (rapid rehousing providers) to the greatest extent possible.

### **Lower Shelter and Transitional Housing Barriers**

Emergency shelters within the area remain unavailable for use by a fair amount of the homeless population. This can be for a number of reasons such as; drug or alcohol use, mental health issues, criminal history, trespass orders, and prior shelter stays. There is a need to expand the shelter availability to meet the needs of our homeless population. In 2023, the capacity of emergency shelters has started to be tracked. Additionally, discussion has started about expanding shelter space to meet the needs of some of the unserved population.

Next Steps:

- Engaging emergency shelters in resource and policy changes that will allow them to serve a higher percentage of the unsheltered homeless population.

### **Conclusion**

The last three years, covered by the 2019-2022 CoC Plan was a time of progress and improvement for the FL-514 Ocala/Marion County Continuum of Care. However, challenges stated above during that time period limited the advancement that the Continuum of Care was able to achieve.

Early 2023 has marked a period of better understanding and alignment among the CoC staff, Board and membership. This understanding of regulations and practices has created the alignment which has fostered more consistent performance among providers. This consistency will continue to grow as the CoC moves forward.

The CoC in Marion County is blessed with a number of opportunities that will enable it to better serve our homeless population. A more streamlined Coordinated Entry process, the opportunity for expanded permanent supportive housing and a new homeless engagement center coming online are just examples of opportunities that will move the CoC forward.

Finally, while affecting the availability of affordable housing lies outside the area of responsibility of the Continuum of Care, any plan to address homelessness must recognize the challenges rising housing costs play in the ability to prevent homelessness or get families rehoused. Rental housing costs in

Marion County have increased by 29% in the last two years. This is making it increasingly difficult for lower income and fixed income families to maintain their housing. Rapid rehousing, homeless prevention, street outreach and other efforts are all excellent tools to meet the needs of our homeless population, But without affordable, sustainable housing for this population, the efforts of the homeless services system will be limited in their success.