Santa Cruz County Diversion Work Group

Proposal to Implement Diversion as a Component of Smart Path
DRAFT – Revised February 6, 2020

A. Background

The Santa Cruz County Human Services Department manages the Santa Cruz County Coordinated Entry (CE) system, Smart Path. Over the past year, HSD has been exploring adding a Diversion component to Smart Path. In August 2019, Focus Strategies completed a baseline assessment report on the homeless response system in Santa Cruz county which included some initial recommendations for system improvements. One of these recommendations was to introduce a systemwide diversion practice. From September 2019 through January, Focus Strategies facilitated a small work group consisting of staff from HSD, Housing Matters and the Veterans Resource Center (VRC) to develop a proposal for how to integrate diversion into Smart Path and suggested implementation steps. This document summarizes the work group's proposed approach to implementation of diversion in Santa Cruz county.

B. Diversion: General Description and Benefits

Diversion (also known as Problem Solving or Rapid Resolution) is a strategy designed to help a person or household identify a pathway to resolve their current housing crisis without needing ongoing shelter or a housing resource from the homeless system. Diversion is not a program, it is a practice in which a trained diversion specialist conducts a creative, strengths-based conversation focused on helping people explore all safe housing options available to them. Since most communities do not have enough shelter or housing resources to meet the needs of everyone seeking assistance, diversion helps ensure limited resources are used as much as possible to assist those who have no other options.

Diversion has numerous benefits for people seeking assistance, including:
- Providing a strengths-based and empowerment-driven approach
- Engaging persons in identifying solutions that will work best for them
- Offering an immediate opportunity to explore housing resolutions
- Reducing stigma or negative impact(s) often associated with experiences of literal homelessness or shelter stays

Diversion also has benefits for the community's efforts to end homelessness:
- Ensuring all safe, alternative resources have been explored prior to accessing limited resources of system
- Prioritizing limited resources for those who do not have options outside the system
- Reducing new experiences of literal homelessness (inflow)
- Resolving housing crises at lower costs and with greater timeliness

C. Implementation of Diversion in Santa Cruz County – Recommendations

The work group makes the following recommendations for implementation of diversion in Santa Cruz county.

1. Goals

The main goals of diversion in Santa Cruz are:
- Quickly responding to the crisis of homelessness with a strengths-based strategy that empowers people who are experiencing homelessness to identify solutions;
- Reducing the numbers of people who are waiting for shelter or for a housing placement through Smart Path;
- Reducing the number of Smart Path assessments – assessments are done only when other options are exhausted, not as a first step;
- Ensuring housing placements through Smart Path are prioritized for people who need them most.

The group also discussed finding a different name than "diversion" that better reflects the strengths-based nature of the practice. Some options proposed included: rapid solution, first solution, and primary solution.

2. Target Population

The target population for diversion in Santa Cruz will be any individual or family seeking assistance from the homeless system, including:
- Those who are literally homeless – unsheltered or living in emergency shelter
- Those who are fleeing domestic violence

Those who are not yet literally homeless but have unstable housing situations (e.g. doubled up, couch surfing) and people who are housed but facing possible eviction (e.g. behind on rent, received 30-day notice), generally would not be eligible for diversion as they are not at imminent risk of literal homelessness. Households in this situation would be referred to traditional prevention resources for financial and/or legal assistance.

3. Where and How Offered

Integration of Diversion into Smart Path Process

The work group recommends that diversion be integrated into the Smart Path process as follows:

- A diversion conversation will be conducted with each individual or family as a first step of the Smart Path process, prior to conducting the Smart Path Assessment (VI-SPDAT);
- Diversion conversations will be conducted by Assessors, either at Access Points or by Roaming Assessors. These staff positions may have a new name, such as "Diversion Specialist" or "Assessor/Problem Solver," or "Assessor/Diversion Specialist."
- Assessors/Diversion Specialists will receive training on how to implement this practice with fidelity to best practices.
- Currently, there are around 300 individuals trained to conduct assessments, but most of them conduct only a handful of assessments each year. In order to ensure high quality and similar experience for people who approach the system, with diversion integrated in the new system

approximately 40 - 50 of the current assessors will continue to conduct assessments (as well as conducting diversion), while the remaining assessors will be trained to explain the new Smart Path process and direct people to an Access Point where they can receive diversion and assessment. Roaming Assessors will be available to come and do diversion/assessment for people who cannot go to an Access Point, to ensure this change does not create access barriers.

- Assessors/Diversion Specialists will attempt diversion with each household. For those that are able to successfully identify a housing solution (such as moving in with a friend or family, restoring a former housing situation, returning to their community of origin, or other solution), the Assessor/Diversion Specialist will provide support to execute the solution. The extent to which Assessors/Diversion Specialists will be able to provide any ongoing support to help implement housing solutions will be dependent on resources (see below, under Duration of Diversion assistance).

- Assessors/Diversion Specialists will have access to a pool of flexible funding that can be used to support clients to implement housing solutions (small amounts of one-time assistance, such as for move-in costs or to help defray a debt that will allow a person to move back in with a friend or family member).

- Households that do not identify a solution through diversion will move on to receive an assessment for a housing resource.

- If Inventory-Based Prioritization is adopted (see below) the person or household would be informed immediately after their assessment whether they are likely to receive a housing referral or not, and if not be encouraged to re-engage with diversion.

The flow chart at the end of this document illustrates visually how Diversion would fit into Smart Path.

Developing a Diversion Guide and Training Curriculum:

- Diversion generally works best as a flexible and strengths-based conversation rather than a fixed set of questions, so the work group does not recommend developing a specific diversion tool or questionnaire. Instead, HSD will develop a Diversion Manual. The group discussed the value of having a diversion guide that incudes sample questions but allows for flexibility in how staff conduct the conversation.

- Becoming a successful diversion practitioner requires very specific skills, including: active listening, open-mindedness, flexibility, problem-solving, motivational interviewing and engagement. Assessors/Diversion Specialists will receive both initial and ongoing training on diversion, which will be coordinated by HSD. Training will include role playing, as well as opportunities to shadow experienced diversion specialists as well as being observed and receiving feedback from an experienced practitioner.

Duration of Diversion Assistance:

- In some communities, a household that is being diverted can work with a Diversion Specialist for a specified time period to implement a solution, while in others, assistance is offered only at the point of contact ("one touch") with a little bit of follow up available.
- The work group recommends that Assessors/Diversion Specialists have the ability to work with people over a period of time, ideally about 30 days. Currently the 4 roaming assessors can do a longer period of engagement with people, but other assessors cannot, and resources would be needed to add this to the work assessors do.

Other Proposed Changes to Smart Path:

Some additional changes HSD is recommending to complement the implementation of Diversion, include:

- Shelter Placement: Conducting diversion conversations prior to shelter entry helps ensure that households who have other options do not enter shelter and preserves shelter bed capacity for those who have nowhere to go. In Santa Cruz county, shelter entry is not managed through Smart Path. However, HSD is currently conducting a pilot project with Housing Matters to refer families to Rebele Shelter through Smart Path. If this approach proves to be successful, HSD will recommend scaling this up for all shelters. This will require buy-in from shelter funders and shelter operators. Also, a set of prioritization factors will have to be developed. HSD recommends that these be based on immediate vulnerability – e.g. where the household is staying (unsheltered should have priority over people who are doubled up); acute health issues; behavioral health condition; and age (older adults, families with young children get priority).

- Inventory-Based Prioritization: Currently the Smart Path process assesses many more households each month than the system has the capacity to serve, and people who are assessed do not know whether they are likely to get assistance – in other words, there are very limited housing program openings (PSH or RRH) and many people waiting for them. To address this issue, many communities have shifted to a process of inventory-based prioritization (previously referred to as dynamic prioritization), in which a smaller number of highest needs households are prioritized, and the size of this group is based on the anticipated number of housing openings each month or each quarter. This approach ensures that there is a much smaller group of people actively waiting for assistance, making it easier to manage the list and locate people once a slot is available. However, this also means that many people will not be prioritized, making it essential that diversion assistance is available for them. HSD is developing a set of recommended changes to Smart Path to implement dynamic prioritization in conjunction with the rollout of diversion.

4. Measures of Success

The work group is recommending that some key performance measures be established, including:
- Percentage of people who receive a diversion conversation who are successfully diverted. Based on data from other communities, this will likely be higher for families than for adults.
- Time from diversion conversation to time the housing resolution plan is successfully implemented

- Rate of return to homelessness for people successfully diverted.

By implementing inventory-based prioritization along with diversion, HSD expects the following additional outcomes will be achieved:
- Shortening the processing time between assessment and referral to a housing program
- Fewer people, and those with higher needs, will be assessed by Smart Path

The work group is recommending that Diversion be set up within HMIS (Clarity) as a component of the Smart Path workflow, so that results can be tracked both for the individual receiving assistance and also at the system level.

5.   Tools, Training and Resources Needed

The work group identified the following tools and training that will be needed to launch diversion (some of which have been mentioned above):

- Development of a Diversion Guide that includes suggested diversion conversation questions, outlines the practice and details policies and procedures for how diversion will be integrated into the Smart Path process;
- Development of a training curriculum that encompasses both initial training for Assessors/Diversion Specialists as well as an ongoing refresher training component;
- Establishing a learning collaborative or community of practice in which staff who are doing diversion can engage in regular peer learning
- Some organizations may need some capacity building to be able to work with clients to implement diversion plans (e.g. administering flexible funding)
- The HMIS (Clarity) system will need to be reconfigured to add diversion as a step in the Smart Path process.
- Financial resources will be needed to create a pool of flexible funding to support housing solutions
- If Assessors/Diversion Specialists will be working with clients over a period of time to implement solutions, this will likely require additional resources.

6.   Implementation Steps and Timeline

The work group recommends the following initial implementation steps and timeline:
- Hold a "Diversion 101" training for interested stakeholders in February 2020
- Hold a meeting in February 2020 to discuss and refine this diversion proposal (and also proposal for changes to Smart Path prioritization) to Smart Path partners
- Present proposal to Smart Path Steering Committee and HAP (dates TBD)

Santa Cruz County - Sample CES/HMIS/Client Experience Diversion Work Flow

Coordinated Entry System Process Flow

Step 1. Screening	Step 2. Diversion Conversation	Step 3. Assessment	Step 4. Matching	Step 5. Referral

HMIS Process Flow

Client Experience Flow

1. Literally homeless or fleeing DV?

Yes, engage in Diversion Conversation.

No, refer to mainstream resources .

2. Diversion Conversation with Diversion Specialist at any Access Point.

Alternative safe housing solution identified.

Alternative safe housing solution **not** identified.

Client is housed.

Client moves onto assessment.

3. Assessment

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"Thank you for sharing your story."

4. Prioritization/Matching

"You have been prioritized for housing."

"I'm sorry, you have not been prioritized for housing. Let's explore another solution for you."

5. Receive referral to housing program.