Santa Cruz County Diversion Work Group

Proposal to Implement Inventory-Driven Prioritization within Smart Path
DRAFT – February 6, 2020

A.   Background

The Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (HSD) manages the Santa Cruz County Coordinated Entry (CE) system, Smart Path. Over the past year, HSD has been exploring refining the Smart Path prioritization process to provide more immediate feedback about expectations for assistance to clients and providers. 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 inventory-driven prioritization (sometimes referred to as *dynamic prioritization*). 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). This group focused on developing a strategy to implement Diversion as an element of Smart Path and consider other ways to improve Smart Path effectiveness. This document summarizes the work group's proposed approach to implementing inventory-based prioritization in Santa Cruz county.

B.   Inventory-based Prioritization: General Description and Benefits

Inventory-based Prioritization (sometimes referred to as dynamic prioritization) is a strategy in which the number of people prioritized for resources is informed specifically by the availability of inventory in Rapid Rehousing and Permanent Supportive Housing. Prioritization polices determine the criteria that will be used to identify a group of households considered to be in a prioritized status (this can be called "Priority Status," "Housing Referral Status," or some other name). The number of households prioritized is sized based on the anticipated number of program openings within a determined time frame, in which those prioritized can be expected to be enrolled and/or housed. This process results in a much shorter list of people to manage and ensures that those prioritized represent the highest needs households, have been recently assessed, and are easier to locate. It also eliminates long waiting lists "to nowhere." For this form of prioritization to be effective, a strong diversion component is also needed to ensure that everyone who is not placed in the priority group is offered some sort of assistance rather than being placed on a list. (See Diversion proposal.)

Inventory-based Prioritization has numerous benefits for people seeking assistance, including:
- Providing people with an immediate expectation after an assessment as to whether housing assistance can be anticipated and how quickly
- Accelerating the time to housing by matching those who are prioritized to Navigators or others who can help them to get document-ready to ensure they can take advantage of openings
- Reducing or eliminating the time people spend waiting for a future potential resource instead of working on a potential immediate solution

Inventory-based Prioritization also has benefits for the community's efforts to end homelessness:
- Reducing the amount of time and energy needed to manage and update a wait list on which most people will never be served;

- Reducing the time spent looking for people who are matched to a resource but who have lost contact with the system
- Increasing the likelihood that those who are prioritized are quickly housed, resulting in higher rates of trust within the system
- Making better use of outreach staff to stay in touch with those who are prioritized

C. Implementation of Inventory-Driven Prioritization in Santa Cruz County – Recommendations

The work group makes the following recommendations for implementation of inventory-based prioritization in Santa Cruz county.

1. Goals

The main goals of inventory-driven prioritization in Santa Cruz are:
- Ensure that everyone assessed has a clear understanding of whether they can expect to receive help with a housing resource from the crisis response system within 180 days;
- Reduce the numbers of people waiting for a housing placement through Smart Path;
- Develop the Diversion practice and ensure it is made available to everyone who is not prioritized;
- Ensure housing placements through Smart Path are prioritized for people who need them most.

2. General Prioritization Policy

All housing resources in the system, both Permanent Supportive Housing and Rapid Rehousing will be allocated for those with the highest needs/ prioritization status as determined by the Smart Path Assessment and Prioritization process.

For adults the prioritization process is currently based on:
- VI-SPDAT score
- Length of Time Homeless

For families the prioritization process is currently based on:
- VI-SPDAT score
- Length of Time Homeless
- Pregnant adult or children in the household under five

Under Inventory-driven Prioritization the criteria used will be the same. However, Smart Path will establish a score level that will determine, along with the other criteria, whether someone is placed into Priority Status.

3. Reconsideration for Highly Acute Clinical Needs

The group is also concerned that the current prioritization method may result in a low representation of people with certain high or acute medical/behavioral issues. This is happening in many places (not just Santa Cruz County) for two reported reasons:

1. Some people with acute disabilities, particularly mental health issues, are not accurate self-reporters in an assessment process of this type, and
2. The VI-SPDAT weights *quantity* of barriers over the acuity of specific issues. Thus, people who may have extremely acute medical or mental health needs may not score highly enough to be prioritized.

The group recommends this be handled as a policy matter, with an approach that creates a special review and "escalator" process for people who are homeless for a prolonged period and have extremely acute conditions which can be clinically documented but did not score highly in the initial assessment. This process should be managed through a post assessment process rather than trying to change the assessment tool.

4. Measures of Success

The work group is recommending that some key performance measures be established, including:
- Percent of those placed in Priority Status who are successfully housed with a resource from the crisis response system
- Time from initial assessment to time the household is successfully housed.
- Rates of loss from Priority Status (persons unable to be found, or unable to be successfully housed.)
- Average acuity of those housed; this should increase with the new system

5. Implementation Steps

The work group recommends the following initial implementation steps:

- Complete inventory analysis to determine average monthly and quarterly turnovers and opening rate in Permanent Supportive Housing and in Rapid Rehousing
- Complete analysis of how many referrals are expected to be needed to fill the number of anticipated openings (given numbers of those assessed who may not qualify, disappear, turn down a placement, etc.)
- Establish initial Priority Status line/cut off, based on a determined rate (2.5x, 3x, etc.) the anticipated openings
- Determine a transition plan for moving to inventory-driven prioritization, including a method for updating the By Name List (BNL) to reduce out-of-date information
- Develop messaging for Priority Status and Diversion Status
  - Messaging to be used as new people come into the system
  - Messaging for those currently on the BNL (after updating)
- Work with the Department of Health to develop criteria and a review method for a special clinical consideration process