

Continuum of Care – Frequently Asked Questions

Latest Update: July 19, 2019

What is a Continuum of Care?

Continuum of Care has been required since 1994 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs to receive federal funds that address homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The intent of HUD's Continuum of Care program is to stimulate communitywide planning and service coordination to improve outcomes for individuals and families who are homeless, while involving the many sectors (veterans, mental health, housing, education, domestic violence, etc.) that affect this population. A Continuum of Care may be organized around a city, county, region, or even an entire state.

How is a Continuum of Care funded?

Each year, organizations participating in their Continuums of Care create an application for federal McKinney-Vento funds. Initially, HUD dollars were allocated to communities based on a formula that emphasized population and need. However, since 2012 HUD has used performance almost exclusively as the basis for funding.

Communities engage in a collaborative process to evaluate and prioritize programs already funded with Continuum of Care dollars and then identify new programs that may also qualify for funding. The roster of priorities that a Continuum of Care submits with its HUD application then competes nationally for funding, based on how well its data demonstrates that program and system initiatives are responding to federal performance criteria.

A review of Continuum of Care allocations over more than a decade found that the Marion-Polk region initially benefited from joining the Rural Oregon Continuum of Care, but that since 2013, funds allocated to programs serving the region steadily declined. It is important to understand that a new Marion-Polk Continuum of Care cannot expect an immediate, or significant, increase in federal funds. For example, it took Lane County's Continuum of Care almost two decades to build its current funding level, which is four times greater per homeless person than that of Marion and Polk counties.

That said, there is potential for growth in this region. This conclusion assumes that the new Continuum of Care is well managed and that it views its role broadly in addressing homelessness across the region, leveraging not only federal, but also state and local dollars in expanding housing supply and social supports for homeless individuals and families.

Why are Marion and Polk counties working towards creating a new regional Continuum of Care?

Marion and Polk counties originally formed a regional Continuum of Care in 1994, administered by the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency which volunteered portions of staff time to convene program partners and apply for funds. In 2011, the collaborative voted unanimously to join the Rural Oregon Continuum of Care (ROCC), a "balance of state" model, comprised of 28 counties including Marion and Polk. The rationale for joining ROCC included concerns about increasing federal expectations for data collection that was beyond the capacity of Community Action, and a hope that the Marion-Polk region would become more successful in future years through support from ROCC's infrastructure.

Homelessness has become a prominent community issue in recent years, with increasing numbers of visible homeless people and expectations from constituents that cities and counties take action. The Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative Task Force discussed the region's membership in the Rural Oregon Continuum of Care and recommended in 2016 that participating jurisdictions review the issue.

An in-depth analysis was conducted in the spring of 2019. It concluded that a smaller, regional Continuum of Care offers the potential for improved planning, coordination, and outcomes for homeless individuals and families. Over the past several months, Polk County, Marion County, the Salem-Keizer School District, and the cities of Carlton, Detroit, Independence, Keizer, McMinnville, Monmouth, Salem, and Silverton passed resolutions calling for a new Continuum of Care. Other organizations, such as the Marion County Public Safety Coordinating Council, Willamette Valley Community Health, and the CAN-DO neighborhood association, offered letters of support. Forums are being held to gather input from local and regional providers of services to homeless individuals and families.

How will communities in Marion and Polk counties benefit from a Continuum of Care?

The numbers of homeless individuals and families continue to rise, along with a growing public awareness and expectations that their governments act. Yet there is no designated entity that is viewed as having the lead responsibility to address the problem. Multiple task forces and studies have been done. Networking groups continue to meet. For Salem's homeless population, Marion and Polk counties provide mental health services; three housing authorities operate within the two counties; and homeless individuals move back and forth from downtown Salem to unincorporated East Salem and across the Willamette River to Polk County. Furthermore, homelessness is not exclusively a Salem concern. Smaller cities and unincorporated areas in the region have likewise seen increases in homeless individuals and are seeking solutions.

Key benefits that can result from a smaller regional Continuum of Care are enhanced coordination in planning and service delivery, stronger participation in a Coordinated Entry process so that resources are focused on the individuals who can most benefit from those resources, more intentional partnerships among governments and nonprofit organizations, and greater local accountability for outcomes, so that the region strengthens its performance and improves the data collection that demonstrates that performance. It is also through these efforts that the region may achieve growth in funding over time.

What is the role of the Mid-Willamette Council of Governments in forming a new Continuum of Care?

When the Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative concluded its work in early 2017, participating jurisdictions sought a neutral organization that could assist so that the initiative's strategic plan didn't simply "sit on a shelf." The Council of Governments (COG) was identified as the ideal organization, primarily because of its prior experience in hosting and facilitating regional initiatives for member jurisdictions. Five governments – Independence, Keizer, Marion County, Monmouth, and Salem – entered into an intergovernmental agreement, formed a Steering Committee, and pooled their funds to support a staff person housed at COG that advanced the Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative's work. Then in 2019, once the Steering Committee voted to support creating a new Continuum of Care, staff

support for the Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative shifted its focus entirely on Continuum of Care development.

The five Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative participants reached out to other governmental and nonprofit community organizations to engage in the Continuum of Care development process. COG is currently facilitating interested parties to enter into a new Memorandum of Agreement that forms a Development Council, with additional participants, focused on the nuts and bolts of creating an inclusive governance structure for the new Marion-Polk Continuum of Care.

One of the Development Council's tasks will be to identify which organizations are qualified to administer the new Marion-Polk Continuum of Care, based on HUD and local criteria. The identified organization will serve as the "Collaborative Applicant," facilitating a prioritization process for Continuum of Care dollars. It could also eventually serve as the Unified Funding Agency, overseeing provider contracts. Again, no decisions have yet been made around which organization will serve in these roles.

Where can I find more information about the Continuum of Care?

General information about the Continuum of Care can be found on HUD's website:

<https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/>. An informative document called Continuum of Care 101 answers many questions about federal expectations. You can find that document at

<https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/1187/continuum-of-care-101/>

A flow chart and macro timeline illustrating the local process, with key Continuum of Care tasks, can be found on the Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative web page:

<https://www.mwvcog.org/programs/homeless-initiative/>. For other questions, or to get involved in the process, contact Jan Calvin, calvin.jan@yahoo.com, or Janet Carlson, jcarlson4560@gmail.com.