

## CARES Housing and Homelessness

Ramsey County secured temporary shelters, respite facilities, and services to support the safety and well-being of residents experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Local hotels, Catholic Charities Mary Hall, Luther Seminary, and the former Bethesda Hospital site provided 24-hour shelter for 1,100 of people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic, including seniors, vulnerable adults, and couples. There was also a coordinated effort to support people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, through partnerships with community-based organizations. This report highlights the efforts to support adults, but the county also supported homeless families during this time.

The immediate goals of the response were to (1) establish a respite facility with isolation and quarantine to shelter homeless individuals that are symptomatic or test positive for COVID-19, and (2) provide adequate temporary shelter space to enable the established homeless shelters to reduce their capacity by 50%, thereby allowing residents to physically distance. Seniors and people with disabling conditions were the initial focus of these efforts because of the increased risk of life-threatening impacts related to COVID-19 on these groups. The CARES funding allowed for the expansion of the hotel shelter sites, including expanding the number of beds for females and couples, where there was a gap in capacity previously. By mid-December, there were beds available to anyone experiencing homelessness. Ramsey County stood up a team of shelter staff and social service specialists to provide wrap-around services for clients to ensure safety and well-being, public health, housing stability and security, and equity.

Beyond simply understanding who experienced homelessness during the response, the success of the overall COVID-19 response to homelessness focused on the how well single adult clients and couples were supported in the areas of safety and well-being, public health, stability and housing security, and equity. The key evaluation questions were:

- Who experienced homelessness during COVID?
- How well was RC able to prevent exits to homelessness and support stability among clients?
- To what extent were clients able to access wraparound services while in temporary shelter?
- How well was RC able to support people who are unsheltered during the COVID response?
- Who used respite? To what extent was COVID-19 testing available for clients at respite?

The full evaluation plan can be found on the [CARES Evaluation Page](#). A weekly dashboard with detailed demographics for the hotel shelter program and respite facility can be found at the [COVID-19 Respite and Hotel Homeless Shelter Dashboard](#) on the Ramsey County Open Data Portal.

## What We Learned

Nearly seven hundred people stayed in the hotel shelter program for seven days or longer in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Client demographics were monitored weekly throughout the year. When compared to the homeless population in the previous year, the hotel shelter clients were similar in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender. The hotel shelter client population deviated from the homeless population of single adults in January 2020 in that the hotel shelters served a higher proportion of females (33% of hotel shelters compared to 24% of homeless singles) but fewer Asians (3% in hotel shelter, 7% of the January 2020 count) and American Indians (3% in hotel shelter, and 6% in January 2020).

**Supporting stability.** The program was successful in providing stable shelter and permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness. It provided 24-hour shelter for hundreds of people for months. In mid-December the program added 170 beds by opening the Bethesda and Luther Seminary shelters. This ensured there was a bed available to anyone experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Despite the limitations of COVID-19, the efforts to house people were more successful than anticipated. One-fourth (27%, 176 of 648) of clients who first entered the hotel shelters through November 2020 for at least seven days transitioned into permanent housing. The program surpassed its goal by 76 people. An important part of this success were strategic partnerships with housing providers, an increase in Housing Choice vouchers (Section 8) from the Public Housing Administrations, and additional resources from the Housing Support Program. Housing Support direct referrals from Coordinated Entry worked with these new resources to quickly move clients out of the hotel shelter and into permanent housing. There are limits to this success though, since vouchers and housing that is affordable for the hotel shelter population are in short supply or not available at all.

Since the program is on-going, evaluators are not able to say to what extent clients exited to homelessness and for how long beyond the 176 known to have entered a permanent housing program. Even among those who stayed 7 days or more, some left voluntarily without working with staff, and a few were required to leave because of a rule violation. This question will be explored in more detail in a follow-up analysis after the hotel shelter program ends.

**Wrap-around services.** Providing services on-site was an effective and welcome approach at the hotel shelters. It was straight-forward for the clients and it was easier for providers to connect with them. Ramsey County and its partners were successful in providing some wrap-around services, including financial benefits and social services, to hotel shelter clients. Housing navigators were key to this success by acting as guides for clients as they traverse the systems. Staff did help connect some people with financial benefits, but some obtained them on their own, and others came into the program with these benefits. Surprisingly, while two-thirds (67%) of clients received benefits such as General Assistance or SNAP while entering the hotel shelters, only 5% had Medical Assistance at the time of their first entry and only 1% began their eligibility since entry. In contrast, another 14% obtained new approvals for cash or food benefits after entry. This clearly is a place to expand access.

Mental health services were among the many services that were provided formally and, on an ad-hoc basis, at the hotel shelter sites. So, while the formal records indicate that 24% of clients were open with Ramsey County mental health case management or received crisis or stabilization services, many more were likely served by ad-hoc efforts and partnerships.

**Client Satisfaction.** In-person interviews with 49 hotel shelter clients revealed that most were satisfied with the stability that the 24-hour hotel shelter provides, and the services offered. The safety and stability of the programs significantly impacted their lives and allowed clients to more fully engage in planning for their future. Nearly all the interviewees were engaged in housing services, with varying degrees of success at the time of the interview. Staff were a key element to client satisfaction with the program. The simple actions of greeting someone and inquiring about their day was highly valued by clients. They felt seen. It acknowledged their humanity and gave them a sense of community. While staff were described as “friendly” and “kind” by all clients, it was rare when staff spent the time to get to know clients on an individual level, to understand their culture, experiences, and needs. It should be noted that “this was not expected” of staff but was suggested as an area of improvement to their practice. Clients also suggested that safety could be improved if people with unmanaged mental health challenges have special accommodations.

**Supporting the Unsheltered.** The number of people living in encampments grew in the summer of 2020 from a fear of contracting COVID-19 in the shelter environment and an executive order preventing the city from clearing encampments. While Ramsey County was creating and staffing an infrastructure to shelter hundreds of people who needed to leave established shelters for social distancing

purposes, private community-based agencies were coordinating efforts to support people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Outreach workers from People Inc. and RADIAS Health partnered with public and private partners to provide public health guidance and services, masks, hand sanitizer, toilet and hand-washing stations, access to meals, transportation, and connections to services and shelter during the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020. Ramsey County coordinated meetings among the unsheltered partners throughout the year. Communications and meeting frequency met the needs of community partners supporting for the unsheltered. Ramsey County's success on de-populating established shelters did create barriers for unsheltered people. With the new 24-hour shelter program with services, Ramsey County created a formal intake process that did not depend on a lottery system. While this was an improvement, the policies and practices that guided this process created unintended barriers to unsheltered people accessing the hotel shelter program.

**Respite Use.** Two hundred and seventy-six people stayed in the COVID-19 respite in 2020. Client numbers were low most of the year but peaked in April and November. Three quarters of clients identified as White (42%) and Black or African American (34%). Black or African American clients were underrepresented in respite compared to the overall homeless population among single adults, and American Indians were overrepresented at 10% of respite. Only 186 people were recorded as symptomatic during their time in respite. Over three-quarters of all people staying in respite who had symptoms of COVID-19 were tested. Interviewees who stayed at respite indicated that they felt safe and cared for, but some expressed concerns that one of the sites (Boys Totem Town, a former correctional facility) "feels like jail."

## Recommendations

### Short-term recommendations

- *Facilitate the creation of new affordable units, supportive housing units, and advocating for more Section 8 vouchers throughout the county.* Single adults are interested in efficiency and one-bedroom apartments.
- *Maintain a 24-hour shelter with individual rooms. Assign staff to work on housing and services.*
- *Expand on-site services at shelters, add mental and chemical health and employment services.*
- *Develop housing programs to help people who are working, receiving unemployment, or need financial support only.*
- *Continue the strategic use of the Housing Support Program to bring in more funding for the shelter program and exit people into housing through Coordinated Entry direct referral.*
- *Greatly increase the number of people on Medical Assistance.* Six percent of clients were on Medical Assistance. It promotes client well-being and expands their access to other services.

### Recommendations for ongoing improvement

- *Prioritize data quality and timely data entry.* This impacts funding, planning, prioritizing services and housing, monitoring and the ability evaluate the system effectively.
- *Housing and wrap-around services needs to be part of the design of a shelter program.* This will promote effective and efficient services for clients.
- *Implement standard operating procedures and provide training for operations staff to ensure a consistent level of care for clients across shifts and locations.*
- *Examine the disconnect between Ramsey County advancing racial equity policies and the hotel shelter operations to promote a more culturally responsive service model.*
- *In the planning process, departments should consider who would be negatively impacted by an action.*