

**Alleviating Public Safety Risks, Increasing Cost Savings, and
Improving Overall Outcomes by Supplying Supportive Services and
Low-Barrier Shelter to Chronically Unhoused Neighbors**

***A White Paper to Billings City Council Regarding
Public Safety Impact of Services for Unhoused Neighbors***

Spring 2022

Presented by the Yellowstone County Continuum of Care

Introduction

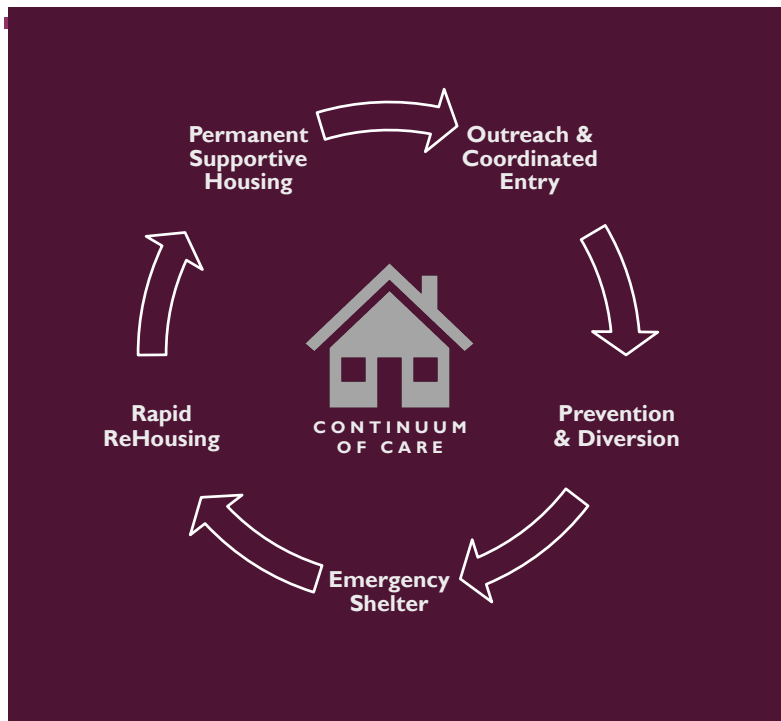
For years, Billings has demonstrated an ongoing need for additional support for our community's unhoused neighbors, who often face a multitude of barriers to obtaining permanent housing. For some, sobriety is a challenge, but chronic health conditions, debt, and repeated exposure to abuse and trauma can often be bigger hurdles to overcome. For people who are **non-sober, disabled, or cycling in and out of crisis frequently**, the options are few. These neighbors need a warm, dry, safe place to sleep overnight, ideally with access to showers and laundry. Equally important are wraparound supports designed to meet the client where they are, while methodically assisting to set and achieve goals that empower people to reach their maximum potential.

The collective cost of inaction is high. Some of the preventable expense includes:

- Increased calls to 911
- More interactions with law enforcement
- Increase in jail visits and subsequent length of stay
- More trips to the Emergency Room
- Disproportionate use of limited emergency response resources
- Added burden on local business owners

In 2010, voters in Yellowstone County approved mill levy funding for mental health services that aid law enforcement. This critical funding source has helped sustain the Community Crisis Center (CCC) since, along with other programs that have a proven track record of reducing law enforcement response to community mental health needs. The CCC does an outstanding job ensuring individuals in need of immediate crisis support are not falling through the cracks. But as the overall population of Billings has soared, so too has the number of chronically unhoused neighbors. Demand for services far exceeds our community capacity.

Last fall, Billings voters doubled down on support for taxpayer funding of mental health and substance abuse services through passage of the City's Public Safety Mill Levy, which includes two mills expressly for this purpose. As the lone coalition in Billings dedicated solely to addressing homelessness and housing supports, the Yellowstone County Continuum of Care (CoC) seeks to partner with the City to deliver cost-effective solutions that provide immediate relief and address the excessive strain on community resources.



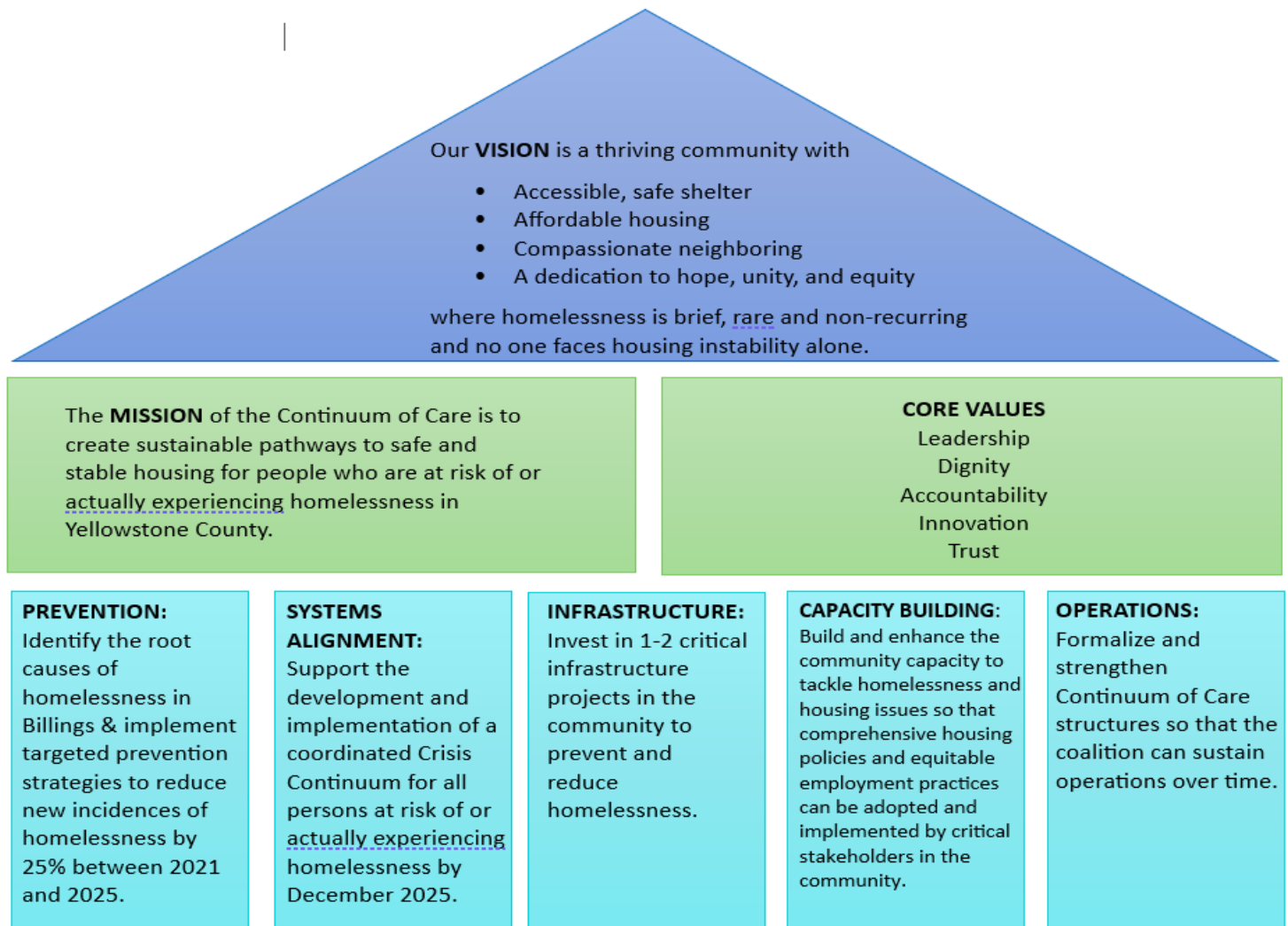
The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development supports and funds local Continuums of Care across the country to end homelessness. The primary goal is to identify and alleviate gaps in community services that prevent people from achieving housing stability. In 2018, the Yellowstone County CoC developed its Coordinated Entry System (CES) as a means to ensure adequate care, while measuring outcomes of our collective work. The Yellowstone

County CES is part of a larger statewide CES that is used to connect clients with the communities where they have the most support and can best be served. Similarly, the Yellowstone County CoC is part of a broader statewide coalition known as the Montana Continuum of Care.

Currently, 18 local partners actively participate in the CES. These members have biweekly case conferencing meetings, maintain a “by name list” of people with the highest needs, and collectively track outcomes in a shared databank known as the Homeless Management Information System or HMIS. Since the CoC launched its CES in October 2018, **nearly 2,200 adults have been enrolled** through voluntary completion of a uniform assessment provided by CoC partner members. Utilizing the wealth of data collected in HMIS, and professional analysis by an outside entity, the CoC has clearly identified the root causes of homelessness and housing instability in Billings. The top five barriers preventing housing are:

1. Relationship Breakdown
2. Trauma and/or Abuse
3. Chronic Health Conditions
4. Debt
5. Avoidance of Care

The CoC is actively working to address the root causes of homelessness in our community. As part of its 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, the CoC identified a need to invest in 1-2 critical infrastructure projects in the immediate future. We believe the largest gaps in service can be filled through investments in low-barrier shelter and permanent supportive housing.



“Off The Streets” was developed as a *temporary* emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It served as a prototype that allowed the CoC to meet the immediate community need for quarantine and isolation, while also collecting data and evaluating outcomes for both short-term and long-term planning needs. The CoC has learned a lot through this process and feels confident that together with community partners, we can create a *permanent* solution that meets the needs of our most chronically unhoused neighbors and alleviates the mounting burden on local law enforcement and emergency response personnel.

During the 14 month period that “Off The Streets” operated at the former Western Inn motel, more than 400 unique individuals received overnight shelter. This amounts to more than 16,000 nights of shelter collectively. Additionally, the Quarantine and Isolation site, which was only open when there was a demonstrated community health need (i.e., 9 months out of 14 months), served over 131 people for a total of nearly 1,000 24-hour stays.



When a catastrophic sewage leak forced permanent closure of “Off The Streets” in December, at the start of an extended holiday weekend as subzero temperatures swept the region, the CoC quickly adapted its sheltering model and moved guests to the basement of Billings First Congregational Church. This allowed the CoC to provide an additional 2,452 nights of shelter during the coldest winter months. By comparison, the Community Crisis Center had 3,202 overnight stays and referred 293 clients to MRM’s emergency shelter during the same time period.

Given the demonstrable need, the CoC aims to develop a facility where community partners with a proven history of collaboration can co-locate crisis response and support services, alongside a low-barrier shelter with potential for permanent supportive housing on site. To succeed, we anticipate a need for City support to provide shared services that are beneficial to everyone on site, along with the community as a whole, such as round-the-clock security, public restrooms, and additional case managers. Similar projects throughout Montana and the Mountain West are most often sustained through a public-private partnership with either the City or County where the project is located, and in some cases, receive support from both. Similarly, the CoC cannot continue its vital work without City support.

It will take some time to bring a transformational center to fruition, but the need for shelter is immediate. We know there is overlap in the population being sheltered and the need for behavioral health and substance abuse services. To assist City Council in consideration of how to best invest Public Safety Mill Levy funds for these express purposes, the CoC has created a two-tiered concept that shifts to best address community need as more services come online.

Phase One

AMOUNT	INTENDED USE
\$180,000	Seasonal Shelter (Winter): \$30,000/month x 6 months Provides Congregate Shelter from Oct. 1, '22 – Mar. 1, '23
\$37,500	Seasonal Shelter (Code Blue/Red): \$1,250/day x 30 days Provides Pop-Up Congregate Shelter When Temps are <32 or 100+
\$180,000	Case Management (3.0 FTE): \$60,000 ea. for wages and benefits Provides 3 case managers for partners that meet the highest need
\$30,000	Project Management (Contracted Services): \$30,000 for design, architecture, engineering, or contractors to develop new facility
\$20,000	Administrative Oversight (United Way): \$20,000 for UWYC to serve as fiscal agent and provide coalition support

TOTAL: \$447,500 per year

Phase Two

AMOUNT	INTENDED USE
\$240,000	Security and Restroom Services: \$20,000/month x 12 months Provides contracted security and usage of public bathrooms 24/7/365 for facility and neighboring properties
\$180,000	Case Management (3.0 FTE): \$60,000 ea. for wages and benefits Provides 3 case managers for partners that meet the highest need
\$20,000	Administrative Oversight (United Way): \$20,000 for UWYC to serve as fiscal agent and provide coalition support

TOTAL: \$440,000 per year

Other Forms of Community and Financial Support

We wish to partner with the City in seeking funds from the MacArthur Foundation through its Safety and Justice Challenge. Missoula County has been a two-time recipient of this funding for similar purposes, totaling \$1.4 million to date. We will also seek support through other grant sources, major gifts and individual donors. In terms of capital improvements, we are eager to assist the City in expending any unused Community Development Block Grant funds, while harnessing the infusion of HOME-ARP funds on both the local and state level. Additionally, Randy Hafer at High Plains Architects is partnering with us on options for historic restoration and revenue neutral investments in energy efficiencies that could significantly cut operational costs, such as solar hot water for showers and rainwater collection for handwashing and toilet flushing. We may also seek funding from applicable business improvement districts and other development incentives.

Conclusion

We believe the City is best poised to make a critical investment in the CoC's work due to the established history of community leadership on housing and homelessness. The City of Billings has played an integral role in these efforts dating back at least as far as the early 2000's when it was chosen by the Montana Council on Homelessness to implement a pilot project that included a 10-year planning and implementation process designed to end chronic homelessness in Billings. The initiative was dubbed [Welcome Home Billings](#) and included a *Mayor's Committee on Homelessness*, which developed a [10-year plan](#) that was adopted by City Council in 2009, including a [strategic framework](#) for implementation.

While Yellowstone County has been and will continue to be a vital partner in ending homelessness in our community, the limited funding available through the County's Mental Health Mill Levy is currently being disbursed primarily to Substance Abuse Connect (SAC) and its coalition partners. The CoC does not seek to undercut the commendable efforts of the SAC coalition nor usurp its existing revenue streams. However, the CoC cannot undertake the complex and expensive task of sheltering the highest-need populations in Billings without support from either the County or the City. For this reason, we are turning to the City as both a historical leader who has been actively invested in ending homelessness, as well as a partner who stands to subsidize a disproportionate burden on public safety resources if this complex need is left unmet.

The Yellowstone County Continuum of Care has a proven track record of caring for the highest utilizers of emergency services in a manner that is consistently praised by neighbors, law enforcement, community leaders, and first responders. We have developed a gold standard for warm, safe, dry shelter, even in a pandemic. In recent months, we've pared down this model to meet the current community capacity. Night after night, month after month, we successfully sheltered dozens of people who were beyond the scope of care that other organizations provide, including those who had tested positive for COVID-19. Many of our guests are active substance users, utilize wheelchairs and walkers, struggle with severe behavioral health challenges, or sometimes a combination of all three. Our exemplary safety record, whether at a motel or in a church basement, clearly demonstrates how the CoC offers a wise investment for the Public Safety Mill Levy funds that are designated for mental health and substance abuse services.