BARNSTABLE COUNTY

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Cape and Islands Coordinated Entry System Needs Assessment

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates the Coordinated Entry (CE) system for youth and young adults (YYA) ages 24 years and younger experiencing homelessness on Cape Cod and the Islands (Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket). It aims to assess the effectiveness of CE in connecting YYA to housing and services and identify opportunities for improvement. This assessment represents an integral step in understanding and improving the local response to YYA homelessness led by the Regional Network on Homelessness and coordinated by the Barnstable County Department of Human Services.

Between August and December 2024, Barnstable County Department of Human Services, in collaboration with Matthew Aronson Consulting, used qualitative data from interviews with local organizations, service providers, and YYA to identify strengths, challenges, and gaps within the current CE system. This report offers a comprehensive analysis to guide future improvements.

Key Findings

1. Community partners are frustrated that CE is not meaningfully connecting young people to resources, and yet they have a strong desire to learn and participate

It can be painful for providers to explain CE to YYA, go through the process, and then never see results. Beyond a lack of housing, gaps in resource integration and perceptions of agencies bypassing CE protocols undermine the CE system's equity and effectiveness. Staff emphasized the need for stronger accountability and adherence to CE processes to ensure consistency and fairness. They expressed a clear desire to improve their understanding of CE and strengthen their participation, while highlighting case conferencing, a process of cross agency collaboration, as an important bright spot in their CE experience. Case conferencing was suspended in 2022 for some populations, but relaunched for all populations in December 2024, offering a renewed opportunity to improve coordination and ensure support for households experiencing homelessness.

2. Community partners do not have a complete understanding of what CE is and are not fully participating

YYA service providers have limited experience with or understanding of how to effectively implement CE. Many core providers do not participate in CE because they are not required to do so, which restricts YYA access to critical resources. Training efforts have not reached all relevant staff, and frequent staff turnover at community partner agencies disrupts the knowledge transfer and continuity of service delivery. Outdated assessment tools, inconsistent data entry, and discomfort with CE processes has also contributed to inaccuracies and inequities, diminishing the effectiveness of the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and limiting our ability to connect YYAs with essential housing and support services.

3. The Regional Network on Homelessness needs to further standardize the CE process while addressing logistical barriers to access

Inconsistencies in the CE process, including policies, documentation, system and organizational practices, may contribute to providers' lack of understanding or participation. Partners have asked for

the Regional Network on Homelessness to further standardize these elements to help them engage more effectively in CE. Key gaps include standardized materials that help providers explain CE benefits to participants, consistent case conferencing practices, and language accessibility. The lack of standard operational procedures within organizations that might help providers meet YYA where they are have also led to confusion and disengagement, eroding trust and delaying access to resources.

4. Community partners are concerned that the CE assessment tool is not appropriate for collecting relevant information, scoring participants, building trusting relationships, or preventing harm

Community partners highlighted challenges with the CE assessment tool, including the absence of a "Client Chose Not to Answer" option, which undermines participant choice and trust. They raised concerns about the tool's ability to accurately score vulnerability, leading to the misallocation of resources, especially for high-need individuals. Awkwardness around sensitive questions were also noted as barriers to timely and effective support.

5. There are underutilized community support hubs in Barnstable County

Community hubs remain underutilized in CE, resulting in missed opportunities to connect individuals to necessary resources and support. Several of these hubs, such as libraries, community centers, schools, healthcare facilities, and organizations serving marginalized populations, are vital to supporting YYA experiencing homelessness but are not integrated into CE processes. A library in Barnstable County shared that while offering accessible amenities and serving as a community space, staff face challenges such as unclear referral processes, limited collaboration with service providers, and low engagement with young adults. Despite these challenges, they've adopted innovative approaches and requested a more active role in the larger system of care. The experiences shared by library staff highlight a broader issue: community hubs, though vital access points, remain underutilized in the CE system, resulting in missed opportunities to connect individuals to necessary resources and support.

Recommendations

1. Update CE Policies and Procedures and Standardize Case Conferencing Processes

Consider updating the CE Policies and Procedures (CE P&Ps) to reflect current practices and remove outdated references and resources. Consider also updating the CE System Participant Notice, which informs participants about the CE process, to clearly describe the system’s purpose and benefits, and distributing it to all participating agencies to display in participant-facing areas. The Regional Network on Homelessness could also collaborate with community partners to standardize case conferencing processes, ensuring it is a sustainable, effective tool for collaboration. This could improve provider engagement, information sharing, and understanding of CE processes, leading to better client outcomes.

2. Strengthen Language Accessibility in CE Materials & Establish a Systematic Process for Translation

The Regional Network on Homelessness could consider developing a systematic operating procedure to translate CE assessments, notices, and critical materials into primary languages spoken in the service area, including English, Spanish, and Portuguese, as funding is available through the HUD Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) and Continuum of Care (CoC) Planning grants. This could be accompanied with identifying a funding pathway for ongoing updates to these materials to maintain accessibility for non-English speaking participants. This initiative could improve equitable access to the CE system, strengthen alignment with the Regional Network on Homelessness's commitment to inclusivity, and empower participants to make informed housing decisions.

3. Revise and Expand the CE Assessment Tool

The Regional Network on Homelessness could consider revising the CE assessment to include options that allow participants to choose "Prefer Not to Answer" where appropriate. Regular evaluation and updates to the CE assessment tool may help to improve scoring accuracy and ensure that high-need participants are not overlooked. Additionally, oversight from the CE Coordinator could help maintain consistency and address potential discrepancies or inequities in the assessment process.

4. Improve CE Training & Support for Staff

The CoC is encouraged to continue providing annual CE training with a focus on administering assessments, building trust, handling sensitive questions in a trauma-informed manner, onboarding new staff and addressing logistical barriers. The CoC could consider improving the current training curriculum by regularly evaluating and updating training materials to address gaps and ensure comprehensive support. The Regional Network on Homelessness could consider working with community partners to identify relevant resources regarding CE and disseminate it in a way that is accessible to the community, while implementing anonymous feedback mechanisms to continuously improve training effectiveness and support staff knowledge retention.

5. Increase efforts to engage YYA service providers that are not currently participating in the CE system

The Regional Network on Homelessness is encouraged to increase outreach to YYA-serving organizations, including those serving marginalized populations and who are not participating in CE by addressing barriers and fostering partnerships through informational meetings and targeted outreach. Additionally, the Regional Network on Homelessness could consider expanding CE implementation to key community access points, such as libraries, schools, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe and healthcare facilities, to enhance service accessibility. These efforts could strengthen the network of resources, reduce barriers, and promote equitable housing and support for YYA in the Cape and Islands.

Moving Forward

The findings and recommendations in this report highlight both the opportunities and challenges within Barnstable County's CE system as it seeks to better serve YYA. While community partners expressed frustration and a lack of understanding of the CE system, they have also shown a willingness to deepen their knowledge and strengthen their participation. However, systemic and logistical barriers, including gaps in training, outdated tools, and inconsistent processes, have hindered progress. Additionally, the lack of language accessibility, standardized materials, and fully utilized access points, such as community hubs, restricts the system's ability to provide equitable and effective support. The recommendations, including updating CE policies, improving training, and fostering collaboration, aim to rebuild trust, standardize processes, and create a more effective and inclusive system to connect YYAs with critical resources.

Introduction

Overview

This report evaluates the current Coordinated Entry (CE) system for youth and young adults (YYA) ages 24 years and younger experiencing homelessness on Cape Cod and the Islands (Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket). It aims to assess the effectiveness of CE in connecting YYA to housing and services and identify opportunities for improvement. This assessment represents an integral step in understanding and improving the local response to YYA homelessness.

Barnstable County, through its Department of Human Services, and in partnership with Matthew Aronson consulting, has led this initiative in collaboration with community partners. It leverages the insights of local organizations, service providers, and YYA to identify strengths, challenges, and gaps within our CE system. By incorporating qualitative data from interviews, this report offers a comprehensive analysis to guide future improvements.

This effort aligns closely with *Hopeful Homes: Sea Change for The Cape and Islands Youth and Young Adults,* the Cape Cod and the Islands' Coordinated Community Plan (CCP) to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness. CE is foundational to the success of several action steps in the CCP and is the main focus of "Project #3," a two-year initiative aimed at developing a more robust and inclusive CE process that better meets the needs of YYA, including youth case conferencing and assessment refinement.

The findings presented here are intended to help community partners directly answer key questions about our CE system. We hope they will inform the development of a more cohesive, equitable, and effective CE system that supports YYA in achieving stability, guides providers in their work with YYA, and provides a framework for system partners as they build a more coordinated community response across the region.

Definition of Coordinated Entry

CE is the process through which people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness can access housing and related resources.[1] It is designed to streamline the crisis response system, increase fairness and transparency, quickly assess for needs using standardized

[1] While the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development targets many resources and systems to specific subpopulations, Coordinated Entry must be designed to support all eligible participants in its CoC and Emergency Solutions Grant Programs. By definition, it must therefore support people with experiences defined by HUD as both "homelessness" and "at-risk of homelessness," covering a broad range of housing crises and instability. For more information on HUD's definitions, see the following.

assessment tools, and effectively connect people to appropriate, tailored supports within the community.

Given the limited availability of many essential resources, CE processes are also designed to help communities prioritize people who are most in need of assistance. They provide information to Continuums of Care (CoCs) about resource gaps to help communities strategically allocate their current resources and identify the need for additional resources.

The Regional Network on Homelessness (Regional Network) is the governing body for the CoC, formally known as the MA-503 Cape Cod and the Islands Continuum of Care. The Regional Network is responsible for setting policy, implementing the CE system, and other related duties.

It is important to understand that the federal government requires CoCs to participate in CE. More specifically, programs funded by the CoC, Emergency Solutions Grants Program, Veterans Affairs-based and some Health & Human Services-based homelessness resources must implement CE to some degree. The Cape and Islands CoC, together with the Barnstable County Department of Human Services, understands the potential benefits of CE, and encourages all partners, regardless of funding stream, to participate.

Methods

This needs assessment focused on the experiences and perspectives of organizations that interact with YYAs facing housing instability. Through informational interviews with various organizations, it aimed to understand current CE processes on the Cape and Islands and identify gaps and opportunities for improving CE to better serve this population.

Sample Selection

Using a concentric circle approach, five distinct groups of organizations and individuals were engaged for informational interviews[2]:

- **YYA Providers participating in the CE System:** Organizations that directly and primarily support YYAs experiencing housing crises and are familiar with or participate in the CE system. This group includes service providers and community-based organizations that specialize in YYA housing services.
- **YYA-Serving Organizations Not Utilizing CE:** Organizations that serve YYA but do not currently engage with the CE system. This group includes service providers and

[2] The concentric circle approach is a framework used in stakeholder engagement and systems design. This method prioritizes groups by their proximity and relevance to the central focus—in this case, the CE system and YYA. The innermost circles represent stakeholders most directly involved, while outer circles capture those with indirect or complementary roles. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding by incorporating diverse perspectives at varying levels of engagement.

community-based organizations that primarily support YYA experiencing housing instability but lack direct involvement with the CE framework.

- **Organizations Utilizing CE but Not Specifically Engaging with YYA:** Organizations that participate in the CE system for Cape Cod and the Islands but do not have a specific focus on YYA. This includes service providers and community-based organizations that engage with a broader population.
- **Community Support Hubs:** Community spaces, such as libraries, schools, and other institutions, that engage with individuals experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Insights were gathered from one library in Barnstable County, which provided valuable perspectives on access points and broader service needs.
- **YYAs with Lived Experience:** Youth and young adults who have experienced housing instability on the Cape Cod and Islands and are sharing their insights based on their personal experiences with the service system, including challenges, access points, and system gaps.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, allowing for in-depth exploration of each organization's experiences (see appendix A). The interviews included questions tailored to each group, focusing on themes such as:

- **Engagement with YYA and Individuals Experiencing Homelessness**: Understanding how organizations interact with youth and young adults and individuals experiencing homelessness, including referral pathways and role of the CE system.
- **Resources and Support**: Identifying the unique needs of YYA and individuals experiencing homelessness and types of resources provided by participating agencies.
- **Awareness and Outreach**: Exploring how individuals find out about the organizations and the intake process.
- **Participation in the CE System**: Evaluating how organizations engage with the CE system, including referrals, practices, and partnerships.
- **Perceived Strengths and Challenges, and Discussions of Ideal CE System:** Discussing what aspects of the CE system and intake processes are working well or need improvement, as well as what an ideal CE system could look like.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Methods included primary data collection (interviews), drawing upon qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the CE system's effectiveness in serving YYA on Cape Cod and the Islands.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted from August to December 2024, representing a diverse range of perspectives from both service providers and youth with lived experience. Of these interviews, 11 were 45-minute sessions, while one YYA interview was conducted in 1 hour and 30 minutes to allow for a deeper exploration of personal experiences and challenges. Interviews were conducted virtually, recorded (with consent), and transcribed for detailed analysis.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding to identify key themes and recurring patterns across participant responses. The analysis aimed to capture significant insights on the current CE system, highlighting both strengths and gaps.

Key Findings

1. Community partners are frustrated that CE is not meaningfully connecting young people to resources, and yet they have a strong desire to learn and participate

During interviews, frontline staff and their supervisors expressed frustration that the CE system is not effectively connecting young people to needed resources. While they acknowledge that resources are now available in the community, CE is not facilitating access to these resources in the way that they expected. One service provider commented:

> *"When I've done the coordinated entry assessment with young adults, I've explained the purpose of it, but a lot of the times [I say] 'this could potentially get you connected to programs,' and I kind of leave it at that because not once have I had a young person get services from a Coordinated Entry program."*

Service providers also raised concerns about desirable community resources not being fully integrated into CE, limiting its capacity to provide comprehensive support. They also reported that some agencies may be circumventing CE protocols by admitting clients outside the formal process through "side door" pathways. As one service provider shared:

> *"There are agencies that just don't use coordinated entry. [...] if they have a client who's eligible for a program, but then they get a coordinated entry referral, most of the time they're gonna skate in their client. And I get it, we all want our clients to be housed, [...] However, it kind of contradicts the system itself"*

Such practices, if occurring, could lead to inequities by prioritizing certain individuals at the expense of others who are equally in need.

Despite these frustrations, community partners expressed a strong desire to participate more effectively in the CE system and deepen their understanding of its processes. One service provider shared:

> "I'm loving [coordinated entry] because if we can have a way to get [our clients] on a list, get them numbered, and get them where they need to be, I think that's a good thing."

This enthusiasm reflects their commitment to advancing the system's success and ensuring that these processes are effectively implemented to meet the needs of YYA experiencing homelessness.

One of the key desires expressed by service providers was the return and strengthening of general case conferencing, a collaborative practice that supports service coordination and client-focused problem-solving across a broad range of populations. YYA case conferencing, which specifically targets young adults ages 24 and younger, also takes place in Barnstable County and began in March 2020.

The practice of general case conferencing, established for the Cape & Islands in 2018, has faced significant challenges in recent years. It was suspended in January 2022 due to pandemic-related pressures and declining attendance. However, as of December 2024, general case conferencing has been reinstated, presenting a renewed opportunity to rebuild and strengthen this essential practice. Community partners have expressed enthusiasm for its return, which partners hope will "get everybody on the same page" and create "really helpful" opportunities to coordinate efforts and establish a unified approach to addressing the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness.

During the suspension of general case conferencing, YYA case conferencing meetings continued, demonstrating the commitment by partners to prioritize the unique needs of YYA. This focused collaboration served as a valuable learning opportunity for structuring housing-focused case management meetings effectively.

2. Community partners do not have a complete understanding of what CE is and are not fully participating

The frustrations outlined in finding 1 may stem, in part, from the limited understanding and inconsistent participation of community partners in CE. CE is still relatively new for community partners; while the federal government established its requirements for participation in CE in 2017, our Regional Network on Homelessness has only been implementing CE for the past six years with a few select CoC funded providers. Despite CoC training efforts, community partners in our interviews revealed that they do not have the experience or full understanding of CE to implement it effectively for people presenting for

support. This has significant consequences for program participants, particularly YYAs. Several core YYA service providers are not participating in CE. Although they participate in the Regional Network on Homelessness as important community partners, they have not historically received funding that requires them to participate in CE. This has meant that their resources are not connected to the CE referral process, the system is not seeing the YYA they are assessing, and those YYA are not seeing the full slate of housing and service opportunities available in the community.

Other providers are formally integrated in CE processes but are not completing assessments for YYA who present to their staff, leading to similar outcomes. The program resources may be included in CE, but their YYA are neither scored nor prioritized for resources. This limits YYA access to housing and services and system partners from accurately analyzing system access patterns, resource allocation data, and YYA needs.

Additionally, some programs conducted assessments with YYA but failed to enter the collected information into the system. This also leaves participants out of the CE process and restricts our ability to perform a comprehensive homelessness response systems analysis due to incomplete data.

Other programs are using outdated versions of the assessment, leading to inconsistencies in the data collected across different programs. Even when all relevant data is collected, some programs fail to enter it properly into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). These inconsistencies can result in YYA being inaccurately categorized or deprioritized, creating inequities in service delivery and undermining the "no wrong door" approach, where all households experiencing housing instability should receive equitable treatment regardless of the access point. Furthermore, the failure to accurately and consistently input data reduces the utility of HMIS as a tool for understanding trends, identifying service gaps, and coordinating resources.

Oversights like these—whether due to non-participation, incomplete assessments, missed referrals, or lack of data entry—have significant consequences for YYA. They not only delay access to critical resources but also contribute to gaps in service delivery and coordination. As one YYA shared:

> *"I feel like that happens a lot where people just slip through the cracks. And I'm like, I don't understand why a referral wasn't made. That could have been another opportunity for me to access services when I needed them, like years before."*

While some of these issues have been addressed, they remain a risk without consistent outreach, training, support, and oversight.

The delivery of information collection activities is just as important as the tools and systems that support it. In this area, challenges also arise, with program staff reporting discomfort administering CE assessments, particularly when asking sensitive questions. As one service provider explained:

> *"There's a bit of an awkward vibe at times, depending on who the client is, because of the nature of the questions we have to ask. So that's why we are trying to make it less awkward or uncomfortable by giving them a choice, like, 'Do you want me to ask you this, or do you want to look at it?'"*

This discomfort makes it difficult to develop trust with YYA, leading to incomplete or inaccurate responses that limit the assessment's effectiveness. Staff face challenges in presenting the CE assessment to participants, including difficulties in framing and phrasing questions in a way that is clear, engaging, and conducive to honest and thorough responses.

Providers also expressed discomfort explaining what CE is to participants due to their own lack of understanding of the process. One service provider commented:

> "There are some gray areas around coordinated entry right now...I feel like it would be very confusing to try to explain to a community member or a young person what [CE] is when we are still trying to hammer it out and make sure that there's no confusion about it."

This highlights the significant knowledge gap among providers, who struggle to articulate CE processes clearly.

These challenges compromise the accuracy and utility of the collected information, limiting the ability of CE to connect participants with appropriate housing and support services. At worst, they can turn off a YYA from seeking services and a provider's willingness to implement CE.

YYAs themselves have reported facing significant challenges when interacting with providers in the region, particularly during initial contact. Negative first impressions, such as encounters with unfriendly or unapproachable staff, contribute to these challenges. As one YYA remarked:

> *"I picture a young person calling for the first time and getting someone who is unfriendly or seems unfriendly on the phone—they're not gonna wanna call back, or it's gonna make them really anxious."*

Such interactions deter YYA from seeking further help and exacerbate feelings of anxiety and mistrust, undermining the effectiveness of CE.

Despite efforts from the CoC to standardize CE implementation through annual training and ongoing support from the CE Coordinator, a number of challenges remain. CE trainings are not reaching all frontline staff who interact with YYA seeking support or the supervisors and leadership responsible for setting internal rules, processes, and organizational culture that affect CE implementation.

Additionally, the high rate of staff turnover across community partner organizations further disrupts intra-organizational knowledge transfer, meaning that even when staff are trained that knowledge might not remain within the organization for long. As a result, organizations may regularly feel like they are starting from scratch, which can delay or impede their ability to provide effective support to program participants.

3. The Regional Network on Homelessness needs to further standardize the CE process while addressing logistical barriers to access

One contributing factor to providers' lack of understanding or participation may stem from inconsistencies in the structure of the CE system, including policies, documentation, language accessibility, and case conferencing practices. Community partners have emphasized the need for the Regional Network on Homelessness to further standardize these elements to support their ability to engage effectively in the CE system.

One key gap identified is the lack of standardized documents and materials that can be shared with clients beyond the initial engagement or "front door" assessment. Multiple agencies expressed interest in having a document that outlines the implications and benefits of CE for participants. Such a resource would empower clients to review and absorb this information at their own pace, particularly after the immediate crisis has passed, when they may be better prepared to understand and process the details.

Language accessibility also emerged as a critical concern, with multiple agencies reporting that CE assessments are not available in languages other than English. This limitation further restricts the ability of non-English speaking YYAs to access critical information and services, leaving them at a disadvantage in navigating the CE process.

Additionally, the suspension of general case conferencing disrupted opportunities for providers to collaborate, share critical information, and coordinate care effectively for clients. This disruption may have contributed to service provider concerns about the inefficiency of the CE referral process. Community partners expressed that delays in connecting participants to services occurred due to the need to coordinate referrals through multiple parties, rather than directly supplying resources. CE case conferencing has been an integral part of the CE system in Barnstable County, with providers reporting that it helped improve their

understanding of CE system processes and supported more effective participation when it was active. While case conferencing has since returned, the community partners participating in the Regional Network on Homelessness must work together to standardize its processes to ensure its sustainability and prevent a recurrence of the challenges that led to its suspension.

However, systemic barriers extend beyond documentation and standardization. Logistical challenges within organizations further compound the issues YYAs face in accessing support. A recurring theme in interviews with YYA was the need for providers to 'meet people where they are' to ensure timely and equitable access to services. YYA reported that providers often required them to visit offices for assistance, which proved unrealistic due to conflicting schedules, lack of transportation, or limited accessibility. These logistical barriers created additional hurdles, leaving YYA feeling unsupported and overlooked. One YYA shared how the lack of flexibility in their caseworker's approach led to frustration:

> "With my caseworker, I would try reaching out, but we kept playing phone tag. Eventually, I gave up. I thought to myself, 'Whatever. I'm probably not going to find housing anytime soon, so I'll just let it go for now.'"

For others, the remote nature of the intake process contributed to confusion and similar frustrations. One YYA described their experience, noting that not having an option to meet in person made the process more confusing:

> *"Everything was done remotely. I didn't meet anyone in person. Everything was DocuSigned, which made it confusing. I didn't know what program I was in. There was just so much confusion around what money I was getting, and the intake process was done the same way—remotely, over the phone."*

These experiences highlight the importance of adapting services to meet the individual needs of YYA. The lack of flexibility in meeting them where they are—whether in person or through more accessible channels—contributed to feelings of being unsupported and confusion about the services they are trying to access.

Ultimately, the combined issues of lack of standardization, limited language accessibility, and logistical barriers erode trust in the system, delaying access to housing and essential services. These issues contribute to a cycle of confusion, frustration, and disengagement, further compounding the challenges YYA face in securing stable housing and support.

4. Community partners are concerned that the CE assessment tool is not appropriate for collecting relevant information, scoring participants, building trusting relationships, or preventing harm

In addition to structure, community partners expressed concerns about the appropriateness of the CE assessment tool for collecting relevant information, accurately scoring participants, fostering trusting relationships, and preventing harm. A significant gap identified was the lack of a "Client Chose Not to Answer" option, which participants felt undermines Coordinated Entry's foundational principle of participant choice. As one service provider explained:

> *"A lot of the times when a young person does a coordinated entry assessment, they're like, 'I don't wanna answer that.' And we put in 'no,' but that's not really the truth there. It's just our only option."*

Additionally, specific questions—such as those related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression—were noted to create discomfort or awkwardness during the assessment process, potentially impacting the rapport between clients and staff.

Partners also voiced concerns about the assessment tool's ability to appropriately score individuals, leading to high-need community members not receiving necessary resources. This challenge is particularly evident when individuals or families do not disclose factors indicating their vulnerability or level of service-need. While some partners acknowledged that recent updates to the assessment tool might have improved scoring accuracy, discrepancies still occur. As noted in the CE Policies & Procedures (CE P&Ps), agencies have two options to address these concerns by either re-administering the tool after building rapport with the client and submitting an updated score to the CE Coordinator, or discussing cases during case conferencing to determine why a household's needs may exceed their assessment score.

5. There are underutilized community support hubs in Barnstable County

Several community support hubs in Barnstable County, such as libraries, schools, healthcare facilities, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, and organizations serving marginalized populations, play a significant role in supporting individuals, particularly YYA experiencing homelessness. However, these hubs are not currently integrated into the CE system, which limits their potential to connect individuals to essential services.

In contrast to other findings that address staff frustration, training deficiencies, or structural challenges in the CE system, this insight highlights an underutilized opportunity: these community hubs function as natural access points for connecting individuals to essential services and have the potential to play a critical role in the future implementation of CE, but are not currently being included in CE.

For example, one library in Barnstable County shared its experience as an important community hub for individuals experiencing homelessness. The library's central location and accessible amenities such as food, technology, and daytime shelter, make it a welcoming resource. However, library staff face challenges in navigating their role within the larger system of care. During the interview, library staff highlighted concerns about unclear eligibility requirements for referrals, noting that these ambiguities create barriers to providing accurate guidance and could potentially undermine the library's reputation as a trusted institution.

Additionally, staff shared that the absence of dedicated social workers or streamlined connections to service providers often leaves library staff managing crises or coordinating resources themselves, tasks for which they are not formally trained. Engaging YYA also presented another challenge; while the library serves as a vital space for some, staff shared that young adults are less likely to visit compared to older patrons. Staff also noted that individuals experiencing instability may not be aware of available services due to gaps in collaboration with service providers.

These experiences are reflective of a broader issue: many other community hubs, such as schools, healthcare facilities, and organizations serving marginalized populations on the Cape and Islands are similarly not integrated into the CE system. As a result, these hubs may not be able to fully connect individuals to critical services.

Despite these challenges, the library demonstrates innovative approaches to meeting community needs, including partnerships with service providers, plans for a new facility to accommodate service providers, and the use of stigma-free spaces to build trust. Library staff emphasized the need to have a more active role in decision-making processes for social services, advocating for the inclusion of libraries as key partners in the system of care. As one library staff member stated:

"*We should be at the table when a lot of these decisions are being made and not just as passive recipients of help, but as active*."

The experiences shared by library staff highlight a broader finding: community hubs, despite their potential as critical access points for services, remain underutilized in the CE system. This lack of integration limits their ability to connect individuals experiencing homelessness to essential resources and support. These hubs serve vital roles within our community, yet systemic barriers and their lack of inclusion as access points within the CE system result in missed opportunities to fully utilize their potential.

Recommendations

1. Update CE System Policies and Procedures and Standardize Case Conferencing Processes

The Regional Network on Homelessness could consider revising and updating the CE Policies and Procedures to ensure they reflect current practices and address outdated references, such as those to assessment tools no longer in use, as well as other obsolete language. Updating these policies will promote greater standardization and consistency across all participating agencies.

In conjunction with this update, the Regional Network on Homelessness could also consider revising and updating the existing CES participant notice to ensure it clearly describes the system's purpose and benefits. This notice, provided by the CoC, is a document that serves to inform participants about the CE system and its potential opportunities. The updated notice can be distributed to all participating agencies, which are required to prominently display it in participant-facing spaces such as waiting areas, dining halls, or other locations where services are provided. Additionally, the CE system participant notice can be directly provided to participants when agency staff determine it would be beneficial for immediate understanding. For example, individuals in crisis or overwhelmed may benefit from reviewing the notice at their own pace once the immediate situation has stabilized. This recommendation will promote transparency and ensure that all participants are adequately informed about the CE system and its benefits.

Additionally, the Regional Network on Homelessness could consider collaborating with community partners to standardize case conferencing processes, ensuring that it becomes a sustainable and effective tool for collaboration and to prevent a recurrence of the challenges that led to its suspension. Standardizing case conferencing could foster more consistent and meaningful engagement among providers, improving their ability to share critical information and coordinate care effectively. This updated approach to case conferencing can help ensure that all providers have a clear understanding of CE processes, improve their participation, and support better outcomes for clients.

2. Strengthen Language Accessibility in CE Materials & Establish a Systematic Process for Translation

Building on the CE P&Ps Cultural and Linguistic Competencies, the Regional Network on Homelessness could consider developing a systematic operating procedure to ensure CE assessments, notices, and other critical materials are translated into the primary languages spoken within the service area, including English, Spanish, and Portuguese, as funding is available through the HUD YHDP and CoC Planning grants. This process would ensure that all

materials are accessible to non-English speaking participants, improving the CoC's ability to serve underserved populations. This could be accompanied with identifying a funding pathway for ongoing updates to translated materials as necessary. This effort has the potential to improve equitable access to the CE system and support participants in making informed decisions about their housing options. This initiative aligns with the CoC's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, fostering a more equitable housing process for all participants.

3. Revise and Expand the CE Assessment Tool

The Regional Network on Homelessness could consider revising the CE assessment to include options that allow participants to choose "Prefer Not to Answer" where appropriate. Additionally, the CE assessment tool could benefit from regular evaluation and updates to improve scoring accuracy and ensure that high-need participants are not overlooked. It is also recommended that the CE Coordinator oversee these revisions and provide ongoing oversight of the assessment process to avoid discrepancies and inequities.

4. Improve CE Training & Support for Staff

To address gaps in staff knowledge and participation, the CoC is encouraged to maintain annual training on the CE system with the CE Coordinator providing additional, targeted sessions as needed. These sessions would ideally cover the full scope of CE processes, with a particular focus on new staff.

The CoC could consider improving the current annual training curriculum by evaluating and updating it to address all essential elements of the CE system. This may include providing guidance on administering assessments, building trust with participants, navigating sensitive or challenging questions, and addressing logistical barriers. Emphasizing sensitivity around administering assessments, particularly those that may trigger discomfort, can ensure staff are equipped to ask questions in a non-intrusive, trauma-informed manner.

Additionally, the updated curriculum could also include strategies for overcoming logistical barriers, such as offering flexible service options, using mobile outreach, and improving communication to reduce missed connections. This evaluation and update of the training can help identify any gaps or areas for improvement, ensuring the training remains comprehensive and effective in preparing staff to engage with participants in a knowledgeable and supportive way.

To further improve the effectiveness of training efforts, the CoC may benefit from implementing an anonymous feedback mechanism where providers can provide feedback on

the training sessions. This feedback can help identify specific areas for improvement, address challenges, and ensure the training meets the needs of all participants.

To support staff continuity and knowledge retention, the Regional Network on Homelessness could consider working with community partners to identify relevant resources regarding CE and disseminate it in a way that is accessible to the community. Providing easily accessible and regularly updated materials can equip staff with the necessary tools and information, reduce the learning curve for new employees, and ensure knowledge is retained within organizations. These efforts could contribute to more effective implementation and improved CE outcomes over time.

5. Increase efforts to engage YYA service providers that are not currently participating in the CE system

The Regional Network on Homelessness is encouraged to increase engagement with YYA-serving organizations, including those serving marginalized populations, that are currently not participating in CE. Strategies may include targeted outreach efforts, informational meetings about the CE system, and discussions to identify and address barriers to participation.

Additionally, the Regional Network on Homelessness could consider expanding CE system implementation to other key "front doors" and community hubs in Cape Cod and the Islands—such as libraries, schools, community centers, healthcare facilities, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, and organizations serving marginalized populations —to ensure that all potential access points for YYA are being utilized effectively.

By fostering stronger partnerships, increasing the organizational involvement in CE, and leveraging diverse access points, the Regional Network on Homelessness can expand the network of accessible resources, reduce barriers for YYA accessing services, and promote a more equitable and efficient approach to housing and supportive services for Cape Cod and the Islands.

Moving Forward

The findings and recommendations in this report highlight both the opportunities and challenges within Barnstable County's CE system as it seeks to better serve YYA. While community partners expressed frustration and a lack of understanding of the CE system, they have also shown a willingness to deepen their knowledge and strengthen their participation. However, systemic and logistical barriers, including gaps in training, outdated tools, and inconsistent processes, have hindered progress. Additionally, the lack of language accessibility, standardized materials, and fully utilized access points, such as community hubs, restricts the system's ability to provide equitable and effective support.

The recommendations outlined—updating CE policies, improving language accessibility, revising the CE assessment tool, improving training and support, and increasing engagement with non-participating providers—offer actionable steps to address these issues. These steps not only aim to improve the system for YYA but also contribute to overall system improvement that can benefit all demographics. By fostering collaboration, standardizing processes, and prioritizing equity and accessibility, the Regional Network on Homelessness can build a more effective and inclusive CE system that better connects YYAs with the resources they need.

This effort would not only improve service delivery and outcomes but also rebuild trust among participants and community partners, paving the way for a more coordinated, responsive, and equitable approach to addressing youth and young adult homelessness on the Cape and Islands.

Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

Questions Asked

Interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and lasted 45-90 minutes.
Examples of questions asked in the semi-structured interviews are:

- What resources or support does your agency provide to meet the unique needs of youth and young adults?
- How do young people typically find out about your organization?
- What does the intake process look like when they approach for support?
- Does your agency participate in the community's Coordinated Entry (CE) system? If so, how does that partnership work?
- What aspects of the current intake process or CE system are not working well?
- What would an ideal CE system look like for youth and young adults?