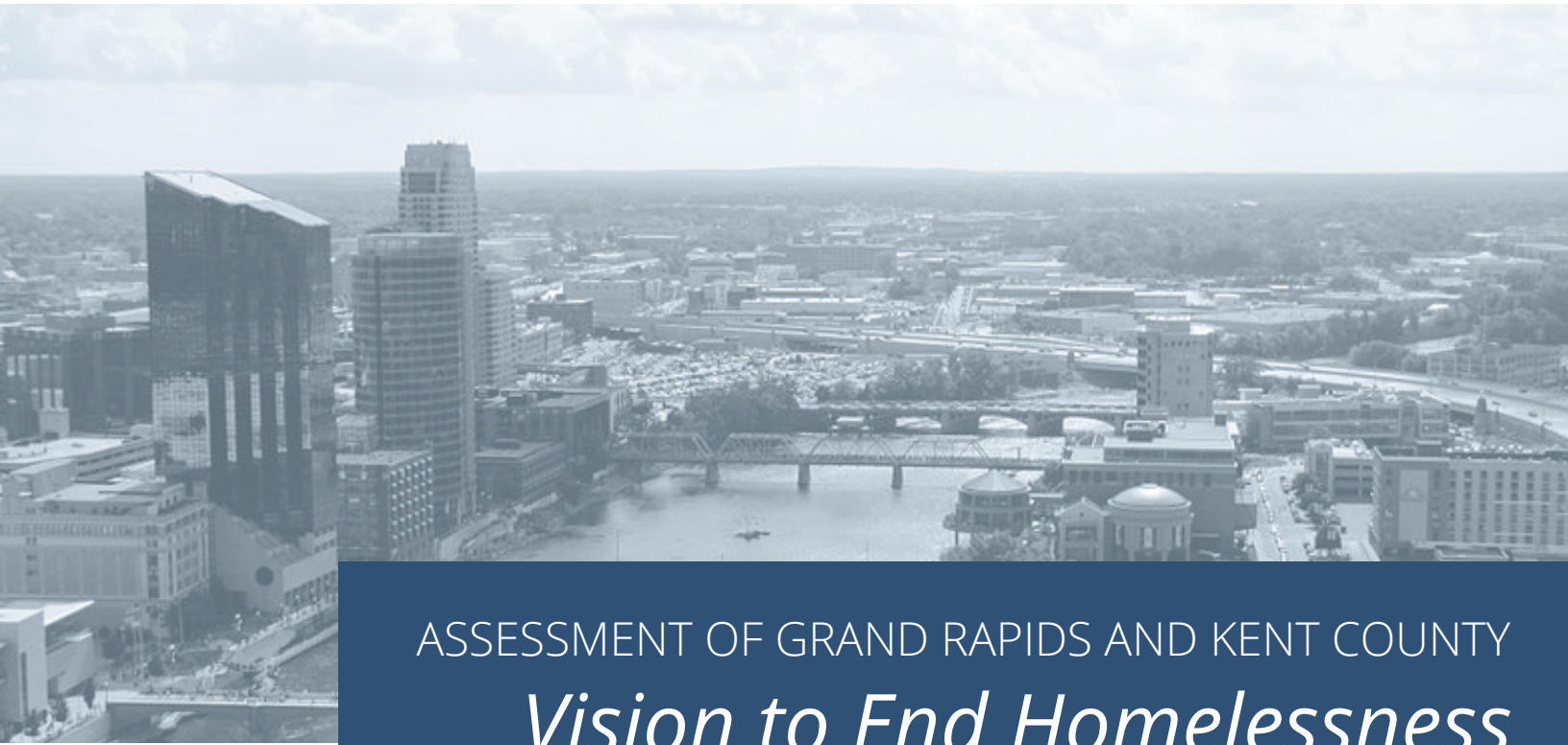




THE
CLOUDBURST
GROUP



ASSESSMENT OF GRAND RAPIDS AND KENT COUNTY
Vision to End Homelessness

A REPORT ON BEHALF OF:

Steelcase Foundation

Dyer-Ives Foundation

Grand Rapids Community Foundation

Frey Foundation

December 2015



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In 2004, the then-named Grand Rapids/Kent County Housing Continuum of Care (HCOC) -- now the Coalition to End Homelessness (Coalition) -- initiated a broad-based community planning effort aimed at transforming the community's response to the crisis of homelessness. These entities brought together sheltering organizations, housing providers, community and business leaders, municipal officials, philanthropic organizations, and other key local stakeholders for the purpose of creating a broad and coordinated response to homelessness across Grand Rapids and Kent County, Michigan. The result was the publication of the *Vision to End Homelessness (Vision)*, with goals and action recommendations framed out over a ten-year horizon. The *Vision* was premised on the idea that the community would shift from 'managing' homelessness to 'ending' it. Rather than just providing a crisis-oriented response, it would strive to create solutions to the challenges of obtaining housing for persons who were homeless and maintaining housing for those who were imminently at-risk. As such, the *Vision* sought to re-orient local response from emphasis on provision of emergency shelter towards focus on preventing housing crisis and ensuring rapid re-housing of individuals and families who had fallen into homelessness. The *Vision* articulated a comprehensive set of strategies and approaches by which the community intended to meet a long-term goal of preventing and ending homelessness in Grand Rapids and Kent County over the coming decade.

As the *Vision* passed its ten-year milestone, a group of Grand Rapids Area philanthropies (Steelcase Foundation, Dyer-Ives Foundation, Grand Rapids Community Foundation, and Frey Foundation) commissioned The Cloudburst Group (Cloudburst), an independent national consulting firm with extensive history and experience in addressing homelessness and strong roots in the state of Michigan, to assess the community's progress in fulfilling the goals of the *Vision*. More specifically, this assessment was designed to:

- Explore and report back on the impact of the *Vision* and progress towards meeting its articulated goals, taking into account ongoing changes in the local, state, and national economic and policy environments over the past decade;
- Review the current status of the community's response to homelessness, and identify 'lessons learned' from the process of implementation of *Vision* strategies and goals;
- Provide high-level recommendations regarding future practice and priorities for community consideration grounded in reflection on the history of the *Vision's* implementation, analysis of housing market conditions, and summary review of homeless population data accessible in the community's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS); and
- Provide the community with a practice-oriented reflection on its efforts spanning the prior decade in order to support and help advance success in its continuing commitment to preventing and ending homelessness.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

In the months between June and September, 2015, Cloudburst's *Vision* Assessment Team actively engaged with key community stakeholders and representatives of public and private sector organizations to conduct a comprehensive review of the history, process, and progress of *Vision* implementation. Staff from the Coalition and funders of the assessment process were extraordinarily helpful in facilitating access to key informants and community data. Through an array of both onsite and remote efforts, the Cloudburst Team conducted a comprehensive assessment process that included:

- One-on-one key informant interviews with 23 individuals;
- Twelve (12) group interviews and focus groups comprising 44 participants;
- Deployment and analysis of an online survey to over 90 Coalition members, with 41 respondents;
- Review of related primary source and historical documentation from the archives of the *Vision* implementation, the Coalition, and other local entities;
- Review and analysis of data from annual HUD Point-in-Time counts and Annual Homeless Assessment Reports (AHAR) (dating back to 2005);
- Review and analysis of data from the Coalition's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS); and
- Review and analysis of local economic, demographic, and housing market data.

With this data in hand, in the period between late July and November, 2015, the Cloudburst Team compiled results, developed initial analyses, reviewed and reported on draft findings and recommendations, and then crafted a final written report.

CORE INSIGHTS AND KEY FINDINGS

Two core insights frame many of the key findings of this assessment report:

- 1 The *Vision* document served as an eloquent and thoughtful statement of principles and values that should - and would - guide and re-orient community-wide efforts in creating a homeless response system based on the core strategic commitments of "closing the front door to homelessness", "opening the back door to homelessness", and "building the infrastructure needed to end homelessness" in the Grand Rapids Area. While the *Vision* articulated a number of overarching strategies (e.g., 'Housing First'; centralized and coordinated assessment; data-based and data-driven programming) that would be critical for impact in the ensuing decade, it never really established an action-oriented strategic plan to implement these principles. Although the *Vision* established a ten-year horizon for its efforts, it didn't actually lay out a ten-year 'action plan'. As such, it is possible to assess progress towards fulfillment of the *Vision's* broader goals, but is extraordinarily difficult to measure achievement of specific objectives or score fulfillment of the *Vision* as a 'plan'. As several key informants underscored in the review, this community process clearly laid out an aspirational vision, but failed to articulate a workable plan for preventing and ending homelessness in the community.
- 2 That fact notwithstanding, it is abundantly clear that the *Vision's* stated values and principles have, indeed, helped in reshaping and reframing homeless practice in the community over the past decade. Not only

has the *Vision* succeeded in substantially altering the trajectory of homeless response and the terms of conversation in the community, its core commitments and goals continue to inform the community's planning, priorities, and investments. Both public and private sector funders, as well as direct practitioners and organizational leaders, still appear to be grounding their development of strategy and practice in terms consistent with the underlying focus and emphases of the *Vision*.

REVIEW OF PROGRESS IN FULFILLING THE 'VISION'

In this context, the Grand Rapids/Kent County community can point to significant progress towards fulfilling many of the broad goals articulated in the *Vision*, including:

- Broad acceptance of housing as the primary solution to homelessness -- including shifting emphasis from provision of shelter as the community's primary response to housing crisis -- to significant, though not universal, embrace of 'Housing First' as a key re-housing strategy;
- Establishment and broad use of a coordinated entry and assessment system in order to more consistently and comprehensively assess consumer needs, and more efficiently refer consumers to available and relevant housing-related resources;
- Expansion of the community's permanent supportive housing (PSH) inventory;
- Shifting of resources from emergency shelter operations towards increasing investment homelessness prevention and Rapid Re-Housing (RRH);
- Expansion of local participation in HMIS data entry, and substantial improvement in HMIS data quality, integrity, and reliability; and
- Strengthening of the Coalition as an entity with the leadership, transparency, structure, and capacity to more effectively direct and facilitate community planning, systems design and evaluation, and continuing implementation of the *Vision's* principles and priorities.

At the same time, several important goals were either not met or met only to a limited degree. Included among these:

- The total number of emergency shelter beds have increased over time, rather than decreased (though with legitimate rationale in relation to scope of need).
- Neither the annualized totals nor Point-in-Time (PIT) count numbers of homeless persons have decreased (though this is complicated by expanded participation of local organizations both in HMIS and the annual PIT count).
- The number of chronically homeless single adults has not substantially decreased.
- The quality and integrity of HMIS data has only recently become sufficient to use for local planning and evaluation, and the community's capabilities for accessing, reporting out on, and analyzing and applying available data are still somewhat limited.
- Broader homelessness prevention strategies linked to desired provider/tenant/landlord collaborations, in particular, were not fully implemented as a system-wide strategy, although several agencies and organizations have been able to negotiate and leverage private landlord relationships that have been of value to their own clientele.

- Funding for and deployment of supportive services for households in permanent housing has been a consistent and ongoing challenge, and has limited the scope and efficacy of supportive housing solutions.

In its continuing efforts over the past decade, the community confronted -- and has worked hard to overcome -- an array of structural, political, and philosophical challenges that in some degree limited the *Vision's* reach and impact and impeded or delayed broader fulfillment of its ambitious goals. While reflecting honestly on the history of the *Vision's* progress and implementation requires mention of these issues and dynamics, it is important to emphasize and underscore the significant extent to which the community has recognized, owned, and responded constructively to these challenges. Rather than remaining mired in local conflict and/or allowing for these issues to undermine its abiding investment in fulfillment of the *Vision's* goals, the community has responded to these obstacles as 'opportunities' for systems improvement and change. To their substantial credit, local stakeholders have taken action over the past several years to build on these challenges as a source of 'lessons learned'. In most instances, the Coalition and local leadership have worked hard to address these issues and constraints, examples of which include the following:

- The original *Vision* document never really developed or articulated a comprehensive strategic action plan (e.g., clear and measurable objectives, timelines for achievement, designation of implementing responsibilities, a system for collective accountability, or metrics for evaluating success).
- While there was general and widespread support for the values and priorities expressed by the *Vision*, the community appears never to have fully established consensus regarding the functional meaning or practical implications of several of its key implementing issues and strategies -- e.g., 'Housing First' and Rapid Re-Housing.
- The absence of full consensus on core concepts (such as 'Housing First') and lack of shared understanding of key commitments (such as shifting emphasis away from emergency sheltering) both served to undercut the efficacy of community collaboration and fed into exacerbation of conflicts with *Vision* leadership.
- A history of frequent transitions in leadership associated with implementing the *Vision* inhibited what otherwise would have been a helpful sense of continuity of efforts.
- While the quality of community-wide HMIS data has significantly improved over the course of the past several years, this data generally has not yet been broadly available or strategically used for planning and evaluation -- either at the program or system levels.
- Both the difficulty in accessing measurable performance results and program data, and the absence of a clearly articulated process for mutual accountability, have obstructed implementation of a commitment to continuous improvement of systems design and performance.
- While focused on its role as the lead entity for purposes of the flow of Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) resources to and through the Continuum of Care (CoC), the Coalition has not always been seen as sufficiently attentive or responsive to the needs and concerns of partnering organizations who are not recipients of HUD funding and for whom HUD rules and regulations do not immediately apply. This, in turn, has been a source of continuing interagency conflict, limiting cross-systems collaboration.
- The severe retraction of the local economy and housing market in the late 2000s and recent market forces driving rental development across the region have conspired to subvert ongoing local, state, and federal efforts to expand the supply of affordable housing, thus setting back several key strategies of the *Vision*.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY CONSIDERATION

In light of the array of 'lessons learned' from the community's challenges, and in view of related data developed through the *Vision* impact assessment, the Cloudburst Team offers the following 'high-level' recommendations for community consideration. These are *not* intended to take the place of or supersede active community planning and commitment to continuous improvement in systems planning for homeless response. Nor are they summarized here in any particular order of priority. Rather, these are framed primarily as broad process recommendations based on insights garnered as a consequence of the assessment process.

1 Build on the positive progress of the recent past and focus on the further cultivation of a broad-based *system* for homeless response.

- Partners should remain attentive to and continue to hold themselves and the local system accountable for increasing transparency, inclusiveness, and neutrality in the processes of systems design, evaluation, and decision-making.
- Continue to work on increasing involvement of private sector and faith-based partners in a coordinated community-wide response to homelessness.
- Cultivate and broaden the participation of permanent housing providers in expanding the supply of PSH units for households exiting homelessness.
- Support and enhance the full-fledged alignment of public sector resources, private sector partners, and nonprofit providers towards continued fulfillment of the shared goals articulated in the *Vision*.
- Continue to support program and policy advocacy at the local and state level necessary to expand access to resources essential to success in preventing and ending homelessness.

2 Support success in achieving performance targets established in the three-year *Continuum of Care Action Plan to End Homelessness: 2015-2017 (Action Plan)* recently adopted by the Coalition.

- Establish systems and protocols that ensure and maintain accountability for achieving established targets in the *Action Plan*.
- Organize housing, services, and action strategies around agreed-upon goals and maintain focus on those concrete goals.
- Provide support for more sophisticated and active reliance on community-based data analysis for purposes of performance measurement.
- Establish a 'culture of accountability' linked to new performance measures that promotes regular and transparent review of system-wide and program-level progress in achieving agreed-upon system-wide goals.

3 Support continuing shift of community-wide focus to system-level performance, rather than client or program level improvements.

- Bring community partners together to construct a functional vision of how interrelated components of an ideal homeless response system might best look and operate -- including a system for ensuring accountability for achievement of associated performance goals.

4

Invest in enhanced capacity for system-wide data analysis for planning and evaluation.

- Encourage local funders to consider supplemental investment in expanding community capacity and functionality for community-based data analytics.
- Adopt and implement strategies that promote more active cross-systems data gathering and program-level data analysis.
- Support efforts to conduct an in-depth and systematic assessment of community needs grounded in analysis of HMIS data.

5

Invest in the training of key community partners to ensure cultivation of the common use of conceptual vocabulary, shared understandings of common practices and procedures, and a collective foundation for consistency in community-wide services planning and delivery.

- Bring community partners together in shared training experiences on key topics.
- Focus training on developing a shared understanding of and commitment to common meaning of the notion of 'ending homelessness' -- consistent with emerging language at the federal level.

6

Expand and intensify focus on housing-based solutions to homelessness.

- Enhance community capacity to use available rental housing for persons and families exiting homelessness.
- Increase the supply of PSH units, recognizing that many occupants of PSH units will need to reside in these units for the indefinite future.
- Enlist, expand, and support the substantial capacity and potential of both nonprofit and for-profit developers in increased production of affordable housing accessible to households exiting homelessness.
- Expand focus on homelessness prevention and housing retention in order to maintain housing stability and reduce the number of new units needed in the community.