

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS: FUNDAMENTAL PARTNERS IN ENDING HOMELESSNESS

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Faith-based organizations serve as the backbone of the emergency shelter system in this country—operating, at a minimum, nearly 30 percent of emergency shelter beds for families and single adults at the national level.¹ They play a critical role in delivering services to people in crisis, significantly fewer households experiencing homelessness would be served and more would remain in crisis without faith-based organizations, and homelessness cannot be ended homelessness without their efforts.

The intent of this brief is to examine the unique contribution of faith-based organizations to homeless services and present the perspectives of faith-based organizations on the most pressing gaps in resources and efforts needed to end homelessness, their role in local governance and systemic planning, and how a national shift to a Housing First philosophy in serving households has impacted their work. To do this, the Alliance examined national housing inventory data, held focus groups, and interviewed and surveyed providers around the country.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT THE ROLE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN ENDING HOMELESSNESS

Below are several key takeaways from focus groups, interviews, and survey responses:

- Faith-based organizations provide a significant amount of the emergency shelter services and permanent housing interventions, nationally accounting for more than two-of-five beds available of emergency shelter for single adults and having the capacity to house more than 150,000 people on any given night in a variety of housing types.
- Faith-based providers around the country indicate that a significant shortage in the availability of affordable housing is a both driver of and impediment to addressing homelessness. More attention needs to be focused both nationally and locally on this issue.
- Faith-based organizations play an active role in local planning and Continuum of Care governance activities, including serving as leaders in implementing a systemic approach to ending homelessness and participating and leading coordinated entry in their communities. Despite some communities well integrating faith-based organizations into their work, providers reported the need for CoC governance to more actively engage non-HUD funded faith-based providers into the process.
- Faith-based organizations that have been implementing Housing First programs have found it to be an effective approach for ending homelessness as well as compatible with their beliefs. And while many providers believe that Housing First programs can be a critical tool for ending a person's homelessness, faith-based organizations also expressed concern that, when implemented, the services provided in this approach can fall short and thus are not able to address important issues such as substance abuse, etc.
- Faith-based organizations are critical, but in some ways underutilized partners in ending homelessness. Because of their strong connections within the community, faith-based organizations have strong volunteer and advocacy base and flexible donor funds that may be overlooked and could be harnessed more strategically. Communities should do a better job of partnering with and leveraging the extensive network of services and connections offered by faith-based organizations.

¹Based on the most recently available housing inventory data from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDE A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF CRITICAL EMERGENCY AND PERMANENT HOUSING SERVICES

Faith-based organizations provide a wide variety of homeless services in their communities, ranging from emergency shelter, permanent housing, to employment, among many others. In particular, faith-based organizations account for a significant portion of the emergency shelter capacity in the country, particularly for single adults experiencing homelessness (see Box 1 for a description of the methodology).

In 2016, as a conservative estimate, faith-based organizations provided over 41 percent of the emergency shelter beds for single adults and nearly 16 percent of beds for families (see Table 2). They also provided almost 31 percent of transitional housing beds for single adults and

over 19 percent of transitional housing beds for families. While not accounting for as large a portion of the permanent housing beds in the nation, faith-based organizations provided over 21 percent of beds for single adults and nearly 17 percent of rapid re-housing beds for families. They also provided almost 8 percent of the permanent supportive housing beds for both families and single adults.

In all, faith-based organizations had the capacity to house more than 150,000 people on any given night.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS A KEY CONCERN FOR FAITH-BASED PROVIDERS

Faith-based providers frequently reported that a significant shortage of affordable and available housing is both a driver of and an impediment to addressing homelessness. Providers expressed concern in finding housing for clients particularly housing that is affordable once a subsidy ends. In addition, organizations cited that stagnant wages make it challenging, if not impossible, for households struggling with high housing costs to remain stably housed long term. Providers discussed the cycle of poverty that is exacerbated for households who experience housing instability.

This sentiment was heard from providers around the country. In Charlotte, NC, the challenging housing market creates difficulties with housing clients. Similarly, in Los Angeles, CA, a provider stressed that while collaboration among providers is important to addressing homelessness it is dwarfed by the need for affordable, available housing units.

Two providers in Michigan reported that they find it difficult to find housing for their clients; one from Grand Rapids noted that the low vacancy rate in that community has been a real challenge. Providers in both Chicago, IL and Pottstown, PA indicated that more affordable housing is needed to make Housing First more effective. In Atlanta, GA, finding affordable housing was reported as an outstanding challenge.

Table 1. Faith-Based Beds by Bed Type and Population Served, 2016

<i>2016 - FB Beds</i>		#	% of total
ES	Families	20,785	15.5%
	Individuals	53,367	41.4%
TH (+SH)	Families	14,702	19.3%
	Individuals	21,511	30.7%
RRH (+DEM)	Families	9,583	16.7%
	Individuals	4,519	21.4%
PSH	Families	9,485	7.6%
	Individuals	17,051	7.6%

Box 1. Methodology.

To assess the extent to which faith-based organizations provide services at the national level, keywords were used to identify faith-based organizations in the 2016 US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Inventory Count (HIC), which collects data on the number of beds in communities around the country, regardless of whether they receive federal funding.

In addition, the Alliance held a focus group with 17 providers, individual interviews with 12, and surveyed 146 providers from faith-based organizations around the country. The 146 providers participating in the survey represented 109 cities in 40 states around the country. Table 1 includes a description of the range and type of services provided. Most organizations provided more than one type of service. In addition to homeless service interventions, nearly 74 percent provided a broad range of other services beyond housing support, such as coordinating food pantry activities, clothing donation, tutoring, job training, among many other services. Programs surveyed overwhelmingly served single adults (92 percent), families (88 percent), and veterans (81 percent). Fewer served homeless youth (58 percent).

Table 2. Services provided by Survey Respondents.

<i>Answer Options</i>	<i>Response Percent</i>	<i>Response Count</i>
Emergency shelter	62.1%	90
Transitional housing	55.9%	81
Permanent Supportive housing	39.3%	57
Rapid re-housing	42.8%	62
Other services	73.8%	107
<i>Answered Question: 145</i>		

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS PLAY A KEY ROLE IN LOCAL PLANNING AND CONTINUUM OF CARE GOVERNANCE.

A Continuum of Care (CoC) is a regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals. CoCs are encouraged by HUD to include faith-based organizations on their CoC governance boards and local planning committees. Of those surveyed, nearly 73 percent of faith-based organizations reported participating in their local CoC governance process; compared with 20 percent who reported not participating. The remaining providers were planning to participate in the near future or were not sure as to whether their organization participated (see Box 1 for methodology). When asked, faith-based organizations felt they and the community benefited from the CoC planning and governance processes, but that they and other CoC operations could be strengthened, particularly coordinated entry.

Faith-Based Organizations Benefit from Participating in the CoC Process.

Of those participating in their local CoC governance process, many faith-based organizations supported the idea that ending homelessness requires a systemic approach, through collective governance and coordinated assessment of needs, rather than addressing these challenges at the program level. Providers reported that the CoC governance process created value in terms of providing an opportunity for collaboration and encouraging broader sharing of resources, data, and best practices. For example, one provider reported that their CoC is a “strong lead agency, [with] participation by over 100 entities including the housing authorities and local governments.”

Another reported that it is “extremely helpful for our shelter to work alongside other shelters and agencies in the community to effectively communicate about and connect to available resources for our residents. Our CoC continually works to strengthen the relationships of the service organizations involved.”

In addition, the process was reported to stimulate community-wide planning and coordination of programs; reducing duplication of services and maximizing the use of resources; and encouraging group problem solving. One provider noted that the CoC governance process provides an opportunity to have a “strong voice together.”

The Continuum of Care Governance Process Could Be Strengthened.

While many faith-based providers felt that the CoC process afforded an opportunity to align resources, collaborate, and work to develop a community-wide process for addressing homelessness, they also identified mechanisms for strengthening the process. One key theme was the need for CoCs to do a better job of engaging the faith-based community in the process, particularly those not receiving HUD funding -- “more diligence in getting everyone to the table.” Another provider noted that there is a need for “more outreach to faith-based organizations, and particularly churches, which do so much work but don't receive federal funds and so are often left out of the decision-making process.” Another provider noted that it should be incumbent on the CoC to educate the broader provider community.

Other suggestions included making it an easier process to navigate; improving communication among agency leaders; allowing more flexibility for communities to innovate and work to customize best practices; and providing greater transparency in rating and ranking projects by offering clear performance expectations. More technical support and resources to meet community expectations as well as for staff were issues that were also frequently cited.

Some faith-based organizations indicated that they lacked the necessary resources in their CoCs to address the needs of single adults experiencing homelessness; and that more funding and programs have been devoted to helping families, youth, and veterans. Given the number of faith-based emergency shelter beds dedicated to single adults in this country, it appears that these organizations make a particularly important contribution to filling this gap.

Faith-Based Organizations Are Active Participants in Coordinated Entry.

Most of the organizations who participated in the focus group and interviews as well as about 56 percent of organizations surveyed reported participating at some level in coordinated entry. In fact, nearly 13 percent of those surveyed served as the responsible entity for coordinated entry in their community (see Box 2 for an example in Charlotte, NC). The remaining respondents expected to participate soon with 20 percent not participating.

Box 2. Coordinated Entry in Charlotte, NC

In 2013, Charlotte, NC, with the help of consultants, began developing their coordinated assessment process. The first step was with developing a vision for ending homelessness in the community and a process for engaging entities not receiving HUD funding. A governance committee was formed to oversee the coordinated assessment process; the Salvation Army in Charlotte has served as a lead in this capacity. The community is in the process of implementing its 211 system. One challenge that the community is facing, similar to many around the country, is the challenging housing market which leaves few options for placing clients once they are assessed through coordinated assessment.

What Do Faith-Based Organizations Think about Coordinated Entry?

Faith-based organizations reported that, while in many places the process is just getting underway, coordinated entry has demonstrated the potential to quickly connect clients to services and keep them from “falling through the cracks.” It centralizes and streamlines the process, prevents duplication of services, and makes better use of available resources by targeting assistance to the most vulnerable. Coordinated entry also improves communication between agencies and prioritizes the most in need. Faith-based organizations stated that coordinated entry is a “critical component to the solution.”

One provider noted that agencies that have never communicated before are now at the same table and hearing the same messages about coordinated efforts to end homelessness. Other benefits included transparency and fairness as well as more streamlined decision making (see Box 3 for select provider responses to the question about the benefits of coordinated entry).

Faith-Based Organizations Identified Opportunities to Strengthen Coordinated Entry.

While many organizations saw the benefits of the process, there were many recommendations for how to strengthen coordinated entry. Making coordinated entry more applicable to non-HUD funded organizations was cited as a key need as well as better coordination with the faith-based community in general. For example, one provider stated, “we have an online database that churches use to coordinate their benevolence efforts. I believe the social service system would be better if [this] worked hand-in-hand with coordinated entry; however, right now, these are two efforts going on side by side and never communicating.”

Another common theme was the need for more resources to support coordinated entry activities, including data systems, additional staffing, and technical assistance. Others cited the need for improved coordination among participating agencies, particularly those who are the natural points of entry.

Box 3. What are the benefits of coordinated entry?

- **Have Mercy, Greenville, MI:** “Communication between agencies is enhanced and better service is provided to our clients.”
- **Catholic Charities of Tennessee, Nashville, TN:** “Agencies that have never communicated before are at the same table and are learning the same messaging about our city’s plan to end homelessness. It has been great to be able to see a by-name list and get closer to having accurate data to look at the true number of homeless families/individuals that are out there, rather than consistently relying on anecdotal evidence.”
- **Salvation Army Social Services of Kent County, Grand Rapids, MI:** “While we do have a bias in serving this function for our community, we believe that coordinated entry is key to strategic resource application - regardless of whether or not we performed this service. Its emphasis on equitable access, consistent assessment, and prioritization are critical to serving the most vulnerable homeless households in our community.”
- **Catholic Community Services of King County, Seattle, WA:** “It is a simpler process for homeless families. It is finally putting some numbers on the extent of homelessness. It has brought into the light some processes which screened out too many high needs people.”
- **Action Ministries, Atlanta, GA:** “It has helped with preventing homeless individuals and families from falling through the cracks. I think that families are being served quicker.”
- **City Gospel Mission, Cincinnati, OH:** “It’s really beneficial for us to be able to have our residents eligible for housing first programs, especially the PSH opportunities that our men are in need of. Being a part of the Coordinated Entry in our community also keeps us in close contact with other agencies doing similar work, which helps us learn as well as collaborate with others.”
- **Star of Hope Mission, Houston, TX:** “Better communication among all agencies, prioritization of the most vulnerable.”

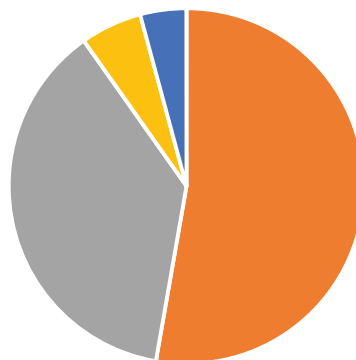
FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND THE HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

Many of the organizations participating in focus groups, interviews, and the survey indicated that they are implementing programs using a Housing First approach (see Figure 1 for programs surveyed who are implementing Housing First programs). Of these, most indicated that Housing First has served as an effective approach for ending homelessness as well as in line with their faith (see Box 4 for an example from Houston, TX).

Faith-Based Organizations Identified Improved Outcomes and Other Benefits to Implementing Housing First Programs.

Respondents from faith-based organizations cited the cost effectiveness of Housing First as well as the ability to meet people “where they are” as benefits of adopting a Housing First approach. One faith-based provider stated “our mission of serving the most vulnerable fits very well with Housing First.” Clients feel more “valued” under the model and several providers indicated that the model is strongly aligned with their values, faith, and the mission of their organization.

Figure 1: Does your organization implement Housing First programs?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Not yet, we are working on it. ■ Not sure.

When asked how Housing First has changed how faith-based programs operate, responses included a change in how they “problem solve;” others reported that it has forced them to reexamine how they are providing services,

including removing barriers and the “shame and blame” mentality from their work.

Some key themes included its effectiveness as demonstrated by improved outcomes; and the ability to quickly help people exit homelessness, serve the most challenging, and encourage households to stabilize in their own homes. One provider cited the tremendously positive impact of Housing First on the health of clients. Another noted that Housing First “has given those we have housed the opportunity to secure employment, to get help with addictions/mental health issues, and is teaching them responsibility.”

Box 4. Housing First in Houston, TX

In 2015, Houston, TX, declared an end to veteran homelessness. The largest city to do so, it also significantly reduced the number of homeless families. Moving towards a systemic approach and implementing best practices for ending homelessness, such as shifting programs that are modeled on a Housing First approach, were credited for these impressive results. The faith-based community played a critical role in these efforts. The Salvation Army in Houston, TX, described the importance of moving toward a systems and Housing First approach for the organization: “We think it is important to shift from working in silos to working with our CoC. We need to be very clear about our mission -- we are not here to save everyone, but to serve everyone, to give opportunity without discrimination, and to understand that we need to make sure the opportunity is there for people when they are ready. The Housing First approach has helped us make this shift.”

Changing the narrative around Housing First is also important. One provider noted that they used to give people “exit dates” but are now giving them “housing dates.” Verbalizing this has been beneficial for the program and client.

FIGURE 2. Interactive Map

What impact do you believe Housing First has made in terms of the people you are serving and how your program operates?

Faith-Based Organizations Identified Challenges with Implementing Housing First Programs.

Faith-based providers reported challenges with implementing a Housing First approach in their programs. Key issues included the difficulty in identifying landlords who would rent to their clients and the general lack of affordable housing.

Another concern that was frequently cited was that the services and support in Housing First might not be enough to successfully keep clients, particularly those with substance use disorders and other barriers, housed, especially if the subsidy ends. Several providers noted that the program is intended to be “Housing First” not “Housing Only,” but that the community often lacks sufficient support services to keep clients housed. Another provider reported that “the negative effect is that the community doesn’t have enough wrap around services; we’ve seen a number of our guests move into housing, return to destructive lifestyle habits, get evicted, and end up back at the shelter. At that point, it is even more difficult getting them back into housing—from the assistance perspective but also from the individual perspective; they feel more defeated than ever.”

Faith-Based Providers Reported that a National Shift towards Housing First Diminished the Important Role of Emergency Shelters.

As faith-based organizations are key providers of emergency shelter in many communities, the shift toward Housing First approaches was reported by some to be a difficult transition. Several providers reported that they felt that the role of emergency shelter was “belittled,” “neglected,” and “defunded” in their communities. One provider noted that emergency services were described as perpetuating homelessness rather than serving as part of the solution.

Faith-Based Organizations Are Critical and Underutilized Innovators and Partners in Ending Homelessness.

Faith-based organizations provide a range of services beyond housing and emergency shelter, ranging from workforce development, legal services, and adoption, to translation, and mental health and substance abuse treatment. Above and beyond these holistic services, the connections that faith-based providers have in their communities extend beyond traditional partners, and include police departments, hospitals, and schools among others. These unique connections could be better utilized by CoCs.

Faith-Based Organizations Identified the Role of Relationships

Faith-based organizations create a strong support network for people experiencing homelessness; as one provider noted, “our compassion compels us to take action.” Providers indicated that they often become an ongoing source of support and community for people who have moved into housing. One provider stated, “we are also able to build relationships with those we serve that outlast their need for assistance from us.” Another provider reported that volunteers can serve as an “intentional friend” to those who have been housed. In fact, this provider advocated for a broader effort for faith-based organizations to train volunteers around how to develop longer term connections with people experiencing homelessness who have been housed. Another provider reported that, “connecting our residents to local churches is often a key aspect of them staying in housing long-term. Relationships are key to all of our success, and for many of the men walking through our doors, there’s a lack of key relationships.”

Faith-Based Organizations Have Untapped Volunteer and Advocacy Base

These organizations are also able to extend their reach in the community with their volunteer and advocacy base. For example, one provider noted that, “with thousands of volunteers serving in our shelter each year, many of these life-giving relationships are being formed and are mutually beneficial for our residents and the volunteers. There are a lot of unique contributions we’re able to make in our community, and I’m glad that we’re a part of the CoC in our community.” Another provider indicated that they have, “a huge support system in the community that other non-profits do not have. We have 1,600 volunteers annually from the local faith community.”

Others described their advocacy base, locally, as well as nationally, that could be better harnessed in creative ways. One provider indicated that faith-based organizations can serve as a powerful voice to support what they have seen locally in terms of the impacts of and need for homeless programs.

Faith-Based Organizations Identify and Fill Gaps in Services

Faith-based organizations may be providing services that extend beyond what local CoCs can provide. One provider indicated that they serve as the only Muslim-based Housing First provider in their area and perhaps in the entire nation. Others are serving the unique needs of rural providers. For example, one provider from Arlington, WA, noted that, “we serve the underserved rural areas, Spanish and Russian speakers that no one else will serve. We are coordinating communities and service providers into a ‘one-stop’ service centers in outlying areas. The County is not reaching into these areas.”

Change happens at a local level, noted one provider, who indicated the community should listen to what faith-based organizations have to offer and examine ways to connect them to broader challenges in the community. Better integrating the services and resources offered through faith-based organizations would be beneficial for reasons beyond what many communities may realize.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Responses from this snapshot of faith-based organizations have provided insight into some actions that CoCs, faith-based organizations, and the federal government can take to improve coordination and better integrate efforts.

WHAT CAN COCS DO?

- Make a concerted effort to engage those faith-based organizations currently serving on your CoC. Develop a faith-based subgroup that strategically engages additional organizations and community members in the CoC process. This is particularly important for engaging organizations that do not receive HUD funding and may not see the value to their participation.
- Work with faith-based organizations to strategically map out available resources (e.g., partnerships, volunteers, advocacy base) and connections that could help to fill local gaps in services.
- Change the narrative about emergency shelter. Faith-based organizations provide important crisis services throughout the country. CoCs should be mindful about language that may demean or devalue the important work of faith-based organizations in this area.

WHAT CAN FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS DO?

- Educate CoCs about what specific services, including other resources and partnerships, their organizations can provide to the community. Participate in a strategic discussion about how these resources can or already do fill existing gaps.

- Strengthen their engagement in the CoC governance process.
- Break down silos within the local faith-based community. Partnering with other local faith-based organizations can encourage a broader community and faith-oriented discussion about ending homelessness.

WHAT CAN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DO?

- Prioritize resources and programs that address the affordable housing crisis in this country.
- Develop guidance for CoCs about how they can more intentionally engage faith-based organizations at the local level.
- Devote more resources and technical assistance to communities to support local governance efforts, especially coordinated entry.

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Ending homelessness requires a systems approach where communities effectively coordinate and align available resources and services. Building inclusive partnerships between secular and faith-based service providers in a community is critical step in this process and is needed to address homelessness locally as well as to advocate for the importance of homeless programs nationally. Without faith-based partners at the table, communities will not be able to truly envision an end to homelessness.