
2026-2030

Reading & Berks County Continuum of Care (CoC): Community-Wide Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness

PREPARED BY FRAMEWORK STRATEGIES



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The Berks Coalition to End Homelessness (BCEH), which is the Continuum of Care (CoC) Lead Agency for Berks County and Reading, Pennsylvania, engaged Framework Strategies to complete a 5-year strategic community plan to address homelessness in Berks County. Framework Strategies has worked with BCEH for several years on the HUD (Housing and Urban Development) Continuum of Care Program Funding Competition and to support compliance with HUD requirements.

This plan will focus on concrete strategies that can be implemented or initiated over the next several years. This plan will also highlight bigger-picture challenges that impact homelessness in Berks County that will need to be addressed at the county and municipal level.

To facilitate the strategic planning process, Framework Strategies gathered information about current needs and gaps related to the Berks County homeless response system via the following:

- Kick-Off Meeting with full CoC Membership
- Strategic Plan Input Survey (63 responses)
- Focus group with people with current or recent lived experience of homelessness (19 participants)
- Focus groups with homeless service providers and street outreach/unsheltered service providers (12 participants)
- Key informant interviews with community partners, including representatives from city and county leadership, housing authorities, education, workforce development, health and mental health systems, aging services, children and youth services, community and economic development sector, law enforcement, public works, affordable housing partners, and philanthropy partners (17 interviews)
- Interviews with CoC leadership, including BCEH staff and CoC Board members
- Review of Berks CoC data and background materials:
 - CoC Data, including Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and Coordinated Entry data, Housing Inventory Count, Point in Time Count, CoC System Performance Measures, United Way 211 housing and homelessness-related calls data
 - CoC Policies, including Governance Charter, Coordinated Entry Policies, Written Standards, and HMIS Policies
 - Existing community plans related to affordable housing, homelessness, and/or economic development, including: Berks County Comprehensive Plan 2030 Update, Imagine Berks Strategic Economic Development Plan 2022, City of Reading 2024 to 2028 Consolidated Plan, Berks County 2024 to 2028 Consolidated Plan, City of Reading and County of Berks CDBG, ESG, and HOME Action Plans, Reading Downtown Strategic Master Plan 2021, Berks County Housing Authority and Reading Housing Authority Administrative Plans, Berks County 2024 to 2028 Consolidated Plan

In addition, Framework Strategies engaged two individuals with lived experience of homelessness in Berks County as paid consultants throughout the development of this plan. Their input and expertise were critical to the process of identifying system gaps and developing a community-driven plan.

INTRODUCTION

6 key themes emerged from this process related to the needs and gaps within the Berks County homeless response system:

1. CoC Structure and Collaboration
2. Prevention/Diversion
3. Emergency Shelter and Crisis Resources
4. Supportive Services, Navigation, and Case Management
5. Permanent Housing, including:
 - Homeless-Dedicated Housing Resources
 - Affordable and Attainable Housing
6. Community Leadership

Each theme includes an overview of key challenges and recommended action steps.

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About the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness (BCEH) and the Reading/Berks Continuum of Care (CoC)

Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, Inc. (BCEH) began in 1995 as a volunteer group working to end homelessness in Reading and Berks County, PA. Since then, it has grown to include over 60 agencies, businesses, and individuals, working toward preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness in Berks County. In 2008, BCEH applied for non-profit corporation status and is a 501(c)3. BCEH is the lead agency of the Reading/Berks County Continuum of Care (PA-506) and is also the CoC HMIS and Coordinated Entry lead. The Continuum of Care works to coordinate community-based processes relating to the experience of homelessness and works to build a system of housing and services to address the needs of those at-risk of/currently experiencing homelessness. The CoC works to establish local priorities for system planning and evaluations of system-wide performance with the goal of making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Letter from CoC Board Chair

To Our Berks County Community,

First and foremost, thank you. This strategic plan wouldn't exist without the voices, experiences, and dedication of so many people who showed up for our focus groups and gave their time and truth to this process. We're deeply grateful to Framework Strategies for guiding us through this journey with such skill and care. Most importantly, we want to honor and thank the individuals with lived experience who shared their stories and expertise with us—you've navigated an incredibly difficult world, and your insights are the foundation of everything we hope to accomplish. You are the real experts here, and we see you.

We're putting this plan forward because we believe, simply and firmly, that stable, safe housing is a fundamental right. Not a privilege. Not something to be earned. A right. And with that belief comes a big dream—that we can actually end homelessness in Berks County. It won't be easy, and it won't happen overnight, but we know it's possible when we work together with intention, compassion, and the willingness to do things differently.

So here's our call to action: Berks County, this is our community, and this work needs all of us. Whether you're a service provider, a landlord, a business owner, a faith leader, a neighbor, or someone who just wants to help—we need you at the table. Let's roll up our sleeves together and make Berks a place where everyone has a safe place to call home. The roadmap is here. Now let's walk it together.

With hope and determination,

Jim Reece
CoC Board Chair
Berks Coalition to End Homelessness

Context: Funding Landscape

With a national affordable housing crisis and a rapidly shifting federal funding environment, stakeholders within local communities must come together to develop and implement strategies to address homelessness and create the necessary structures to quickly respond and pivot to emerging needs.

Small to mid-size CoCs, including the Berks County CoC, are often stretched thin in effectively addressing the complex issue of homelessness. They are often faced with an over-reliance on federal funding and a lack of local or private funding to advance solutions. Federal funding alone is inadequate to effectively address homelessness at the local level. Many of the recommendations throughout this plan include identifying additional funding resources. The communities that have been most effective in reducing homelessness are those that use a combination of federal, state, local, and philanthropic dollars to advance a coordinated community strategy to address homelessness.

This plan can be used by the CoC to set priorities for funding (for example: top 2-3 areas to prioritize each year when new funding opportunities arise such as PHARE, Home4Good, grant opportunities, philanthropic investments, etc.). It is also recommended that the CoC regularly convenes partners to discuss and strategize around funding opportunities (beyond HUD CoC funding) to facilitate application planning at the community level. This ensures that the community is applying for resources that best meet the needs and vision of the overall community strategy to address homelessness. In addition to the funding-related recommendations in this plan, there are also recommendations that can be implemented with nominal financial resources, including reconfiguring existing resources and utilizing the support of the CoC membership.

Homelessness & Housing Data

Point-in-Time Count Data

The Point-in-Time (PIT) Count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. Data from the PIT Count is reported to HUD.

- On a single night in January 2025¹, Berks County identified 525 households (682 people) experiencing homelessness.
 - 63% in emergency shelter (333 households)
 - 9% in transitional housing (49 households)
 - 27% unsheltered (143 households)
- Of the 525 households experiencing homelessness, 10% were households with children (51 households) and 90% were households without children (471 households). 3 households were unaccompanied children under age 18.

Homelessness & Housing Data

211

PA 211 connects residents with local resources by phone, text, or online search. It is a comprehensive information and referral service that can assist with a wide range of needs, including housing assistance, utility bill help, food, employment, crisis and mental health counseling, and programs for veterans, children, and older adults.

- In 2024, 841 unduplicated households called or connected with 211 for assistance related to homelessness².
 - Homeless-related calls include emergency shelter and homeless-dedicated housing program referrals, homelessness prevention, and coordinated entry.
- In 2024, 2,215 unduplicated households called or connected with 211 for assistance related to housing more generally.
 - Housing-related calls include a wide variety of needs including rental assistance, mortgage assistance, home repairs, homelessness issues, and more.
- While homelessness is often perceived as an issue primarily impacting households in urban areas, 211 data showed that 38% of homelessness related calls in 2024 were from non-urban areas (suburban, suburban/rural, and rural). 41% of general housing-related calls were from non-urban areas.

Coordinated Entry (CE)

A CoC's Coordinated Entry system is a standardized process for communities to help people experiencing or at risk of homelessness get access to housing and services. It works by having dedicated locations (which can be physical access sites, phone-based access, or access via street outreach teams) where individuals can be assessed, prioritized based on their needs, and then referred to the appropriate resources. CoCs have the flexibility to set up their CE system to best serve the needs of people experiencing homelessness in their community, so long as the community uses the system to prioritize people who are most in need of assistance and refer them to available and appropriate housing and services.

As part of the planning process to develop this community plan to address homelessness, a gaps analysis was created to analyze who is accessing the CoC's Coordinated Entry system, what resources are available, and what resource gaps exist. The full gaps analysis can be viewed using Tableau³. Below is a summary of key findings from the gaps analysis.

- **In 2024, 775 unduplicated households were enrolled into the CoC's Coordinated Entry (CE) system.** This included households who were literally homeless (currently in emergency shelter or unsheltered) and households fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence. The CE system is the "front door" for households to access homeless assistance.
- **Demographics of households accessing Coordinated Entry in 2024:**
 - 17% were households with adults and children (133 households)
 - 83% were households without children (624 households)
 - 36% of households were unsheltered (280 households)
 - 44% of households were in emergency shelter (342 households)
 - 81% of households reported at least 1 disabling condition (physical disability, mental health, substance use, or developmental disability) (628 households)
 - 40% of households identified as domestic violence survivors (309 households)

Homelessness & Housing Data

- 32% of households identified as chronically homeless (continuously homeless for 1+ year or cumulatively homeless for 12+ months over the past 3 years) (250 households)
- 9% of households were youth/young adults ages 18-24
- 7% of households were veterans
- Income:
 - 45% of households accessing Coordinated Entry reported \$0 monthly income (345 households)
 - 36% of households reported some income (280 households)
 - Of the households with some income, 55% had income under \$1000 per month. (The 2025 Fair Market Rent for a 1-bedroom unit in Berks County was \$1,075.)
- Outcomes from Coordinated Entry:
 - 31% of households accessing Coordinated Entry exited to a permanent housing destination.
 - On a single point in time (December 31, 2024), there were 228 households enrolled in Coordinated Entry awaiting a housing resource (198 households without children and 32 households with children).
- Demand vs. Supply of Homeless-Dedicated Resources
 - The CoC currently has approximately 41% capacity to meet demand for households experiencing homelessness who need a short-to-medium term intervention to help end their homelessness, such as Rapid Rehousing. **The CoC lacks approximately 272 units of Rapid Rehousing needed to respond to the annual demand for resources⁴.**
 - The CoC currently has approximately 26% capacity to meet demand for households experiencing homelessness who likely need a long-term intervention to end their homelessness (households with a disabling condition who are chronically homeless) such as Permanent Supportive Housing. **The CoC lacks approximately 185 units of Permanent Supportive Housing needed to respond to the annual demand for resources⁵.**
 - As noted below, the CoC did not collect data in 2024 on the number of households at risk of homelessness who sought homeless prevention resources through the county's homeless service provider network. Therefore, the full scope of at-risk households and resource gaps in Berks County is unknown.

Coordinated Entry Data Gaps

While Coordinated Entry data is extremely valuable to provide a big picture look at needs and gaps within the CoC, there are gaps in who is represented in this data.

- Households who are experiencing homelessness or fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence who do not engage directly with Coordinated Entry are not reflected in this dataset. For example:
 - Households who are unsheltered but are not interested in engaging with street outreach services would not be included in this dataset. Households who are unsheltered and sleeping in more hidden locations (such as households sleeping in cars) may not be fully reflected in this dataset.
- The CoC's Coordinated Entry numbers *do not* include households who are at risk of homelessness or doubled up/couch surfing. In 2024 the CoC did not collect data on households who sought homelessness prevention services through the county's homeless service provider network. As such, this plan cannot quantify the scope of households at risk of homelessness within Berks County and their needs.

Homelessness & Housing Data

- Coordinated Entry numbers alone do not show the full scope of family homelessness and youth homelessness. Families and youth-headed households often double up or stay temporarily with friends or family versus entering the emergency shelter system or experiencing unsheltered homelessness.
- Coordinated Entry numbers may not fully reflect the scope of veteran homelessness, as veterans experiencing homelessness may access resources through VA Medical Centers or other veteran-specific organizations and may not engage with the CoC's Coordinated Entry system.
- Due to these limitations, Coordinated Entry data should be reviewed along with other relevant data about the needs of households at-risk and experiencing homelessness in Berks County, including data from the school system, data from veteran's service providers, data from street outreach and street medicine, etc.
- It is recommended that the CoC expand data collection through Coordinated Entry to include households at risk of homelessness, to better reflect the full scope of homelessness and housing instability in Berks County.

Family and Youth Homelessness

- In the 2023/2024 school year, Berks County schools identified 2,346 children pre-K to 12th grade who were identified as experiencing homelessness. 15% of those identified (approximately 350 youth) were unaccompanied youth⁶. This indicates a significant demand for homeless prevention and housing resources for families with children and unaccompanied youth.

Affordable Housing Crisis:

- The cost of housing in Berks County has risen significantly over the past 5 years. The chart below displays the HUD Fair Market Rents for Berks County from FY22 to FY26⁷. **The Fair Market Rent in Berks has more than doubled over the past five years.**

Year	Efficiency	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom
FY 2022 FMR	\$690	\$811	\$1,038	\$1,286	\$1,408
FY 2023 FMR	\$760	\$894	\$1,136	\$1,422	\$1,526
FY 2024 FMR	\$895	\$1,041	\$1,320	\$1,649	\$1,758
FY 2025 FMR	\$928	\$1,075	\$1,353	\$1,689	\$1,794
FY 2026 FMR	\$1,086	\$1,237	\$1,575	\$1,937	\$2,085
5-year change (FY22 to FY26)	57%	53%	52%	51%	48%
3-year change (FY24 to FY26)	21%	19%	19%	17%	19%

- The current minimum wage in Pennsylvania is \$7.25/hr. The rent affordable for a full-time worker at minimum wage in Berks County is \$377/month⁸.
- Workers in Berks County would need to earn \$20.67/hour and \$43,000/year to afford a one-bedroom unit at FY25 Fair Market Rent (\$1,075).

Homelessness & Housing Data

- Workers in Berks County would need to earn \$26.02/hour and \$54,120/year to afford a two-bedroom unit at FY25 Fair Market Rent (\$1,353).
- The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency found that Berks County has a shortage of 7,715 affordable housing units needed for extremely low-income households (with annual income of \$35,000 or less), which places Berks County in the top 20% of PA counties with the most acute affordable housing shortage⁹. These estimates are current as of 2020 and the need has likely grown since 2020.

Theme 1: CoC Structure and Collaboration

Overview of Needs and Gaps

To effectively carry out the goals laid out in this strategic plan, the CoC needs to enhance their existing structure to facilitate a shared vision for addressing homelessness in Berks County through increased community-wide collaboration.

While individual organizations are making incremental progress to address homelessness in Berks County, the community lacks an overarching vision, strategy, and structure for working together. Community partners described Berks County's homeless response system as fragmented and lacking a unifying strategy.

Funding streams that can address homelessness (CoC, ESG, HOME, PHARE, HAP, EFSP, CSBG, CDBG, Home4Good) are managed by separate entities with limited alignment, resulting in duplication in some areas and gaps in others. Community partners desire increased coordination and strategy around how these funds are directed and prioritized.

While the CoC comes together regularly for membership meetings or committee meetings, the community could benefit from additional forums to bring together different stakeholders to work together on implementation of the strategic plan. Providers and partners expressed a need for regular communication, shared vision, and a space to brainstorm solutions collectively. The lack of a clear countywide vision and forum for collaboration and coordination of resources makes it difficult to respond to emerging crises or attract new funding streams.

In addition, people with lived experience of homelessness are not consistently engaged in decision-making and their feedback often does not translate into action, which can lead to distrust and disconnection. While the CoC has had some past success in incorporating people with lived experience into the CoC Board structure and advisory committees, there is a need for more consistent efforts and opportunities for people with lived experience to help guide system strategy.

It is worth noting that the Berks County CoC was awarded HUD Youth Homeless System Improvement (YHSI) grant funding in 2024 as part of a three-county application in partnership with Lancaster and York counties. As part of this project, BCEH is working with consultants to launch a Youth Action Board (YAB) comprised of youth who are currently/ or previously have experienced homelessness. The CoC can build upon the lessons learned from this grant to develop effective ways to engage people with lived experience in strategy and decision-making.

Theme 1: CoC Structure and Collaboration

Recommendations

- **Assign committees to spearhead implementation of each set of recommendations within the strategic plan.** This may include shifting existing committees and/or readjusting priorities. Committees should develop short-, medium- and long-term action steps around each priority area. Committees should own the success of the strategies within the strategic plan, with logistical and backbone support as needed from BCEH.
 - To ensure that implementation of the strategic plan remains top of mind, it is recommended that BCEH incorporate strategic plan discussion and updates into all existing CoC membership forums. This will also allow the CoC to pivot and adjust strategies as needed to respond to emerging needs.
- **Create regular communication mechanisms to engage community partners in conversations around community needs and strategies, and to keep community partners updated on the progress on the strategic plan.** This could include community forums, newsletters, websites, social media, and regular convenings of various stakeholder groups (e.g., philanthropy partners, health partners, etc.).
- **Launch a funding strategy group that brings together the various organizations and departments that oversee CoC, ESG, HOME, PHARE, Home4Good, HAP, and other funds that can be used for homeless assistance.** This group would be charged with understanding the full funding picture for the city of Reading and Berks County's homelessness response, identifying needs and gaps based on data, being aware of funding-related timelines, and ensuring that funds are directed toward activities that fill gaps and do not overlap services. This would require a high level of transparency and communication from these partners, and a willingness to work together to strategically target limited resources. This strategy should ensure coordination with CoC's Coordinated Entry process, so that individuals seeking assistance can access resources more easily without having to go to multiple different organizations.
- **Re-establish the CoC's lived experience advisory group to ensure the perspectives of those seeking and receiving assistance are incorporated into decision-making.** The lived experience advisory group should be given the opportunity to identify key strategies within the strategic plan that they can lead or guide and should receive training and support throughout their engagement.

Theme 2: Prevention & Diversion

Overview of Needs and Gaps

There is a lack of prevention funding for households who are facing a housing crisis but are not yet homeless. This includes households who are doubled up with family or friends, living in a hotel or motel they are paying for, or facing eviction. As a result, many households enter emergency shelters to try to access permanent housing resources when targeted financial or case management support might have allowed them to avoid shelter.

In addition, there is a lack of coordination and strategy around the distribution of homelessness prevention assistance. Many households entering shelter or living unsheltered could have remained stably housed with modest, timely interventions. While there is some prevention funding available from different sources within Berks County, these resources are scattered across multiple agencies, creating confusion for households and inefficiencies for providers. Multiple organizations distribute prevention funding, but there does not appear to be a coordinated strategy to target or allocate these resources. Because they are not organized through the CoC's Coordinated Entry system, households facing a housing crisis often must visit several different organizations to seek help. People facing eviction may spend days navigating different programs only to learn that funding is unavailable or that they do not meet eligibility requirements. As a result, the homeless assistance system often engages households only after they have already lost housing, missing a critical window for early action. There is no unified approach to coordinate existing prevention resources or to track who is served.

In addition, CE and shelter staff are not consistently trained in diversion techniques, resulting in lost opportunities to resolve crises outside the homeless system. A coordinated diversion strategy should include structured housing problem-solving conversations and, when needed, short-term, flexible financial assistance.

A staggering 40% of households accessing CE reported being survivors of domestic violence, underscoring the need for dedicated prevention and housing resources for survivors. There is also a need for targeted prevention strategies for households exiting public systems such as the criminal justice system, child welfare, aging, and health/mental health systems. These strategies would require strong coordination with other public systems of care and investments from those systems.

The lack of prevention resources and diversion strategies places significant strain on existing emergency shelters and the homeless service system as a whole, contributing to shelter overcrowding and forcing households into homelessness who could otherwise have been stabilized with modest, timely assistance. Coordinated prevention and diversion strategies can reduce public costs, help preserve units, support landlords, prevents negative rental history for household, and supports family stability, among other important benefits.

See "Investing in Homelessness Solutions and Affordable Housing: Return on Investment" section of this plan for more detail related to the return on investment of funding prevention and diversion.

Theme 2: Prevention & Diversion

Recommendations

- **Create a countywide Housing Stabilization Fund with flexible, coordinated dollars.** This should include both case management/navigation staffing and, if needed, short-term financial assistance. These funds should be targeted to households at imminent risk of losing their housing, who are most likely to experience homelessness without assistance. Other examples of how these funds could be used to prevent households from becoming homeless include things like rental arrears, utility assistance, car repairs, job training, and food assistance. This type of fund could have a significant impact for a relatively small budget. For example, a \$300,000 investment could fund case management services and financial assistance to help over 100 households prevent or quickly end their homelessness (assuming an average cost of \$2,000 per household – some households may need more and some less). To ensure this type of program is effective, the funds must be truly flexible to meet a household's need and able to be deployed quickly.
- **Expand eviction prevention, landlord mediation, and legal assistance resources.** This should include collaboration with legal aid resources to support households to avoid eviction whenever possible. These strategies could be implemented in coordination with the recommendation above related to dedicated funding for eviction prevention.
- **Work with funders to require that all homeless assistance and prevention resources available within the CoC are tracked within HMIS and are coordinated through Coordinated Entry.** While it may not be feasible or recommended for all resources to flow through a single agency, it is important that there is transparency around what resources are available, what the eligibility criteria are, how households can be connected to prevention resources, and who is being served. This coordination also ensures that there is no duplication of services. Coordinated Entry staff at BCEH could be the primary point of contact to ensure households at risk of homelessness are quickly connected to available resources.
- **Immediately begin tracking households who come to Coordinated Entry access sites who are at risk of homelessness and record outcomes from these interactions.** This will help the CoC understand the scope of need related to homelessness prevention as well as the demographics and characteristics of households at risk of homelessness, in order to target resources more effectively and determine resource gaps.
- **Due to the large number of domestic violence survivors accessing CE, continue to expand partnerships with victim service providers to increase coordination around the use of homeless and DV funding opportunities to assist survivors to quickly return to housing.** Coordination with Victim Services Providers is very important because they may have access to additional funding resources for households fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence (for example: resources funded through the Office of Violence Against Women). Victim Service Providers are also best equipped and trained to respond to the specific needs of households fleeing domestic violence.

Theme 2: Prevention & Diversion

Recommendations (continued)

- **Improve cross-system coordination to prevent discharge to homelessness.** Enhance coordination with public systems such as the criminal justice system, child welfare, aging, and health/mental health systems to identify households at risk of homelessness and work together on targeted strategies.
 - The partnership between street outreach and street medicine, for example, has proven to be a meaningful partnership to support the community's response to homelessness.
- **Provide training to all homeless system partners (with a focus on emergency shelters and coordinated entry access sites) to embed diversion and housing problem-solving strategies as standard practice for households experiencing a housing crisis** to attempt to divert households from the homeless system to other resources whenever possible. Incorporating a diversion strategy will require training as well as a shift in mindset throughout the "front door" of the homeless service system (shelters and coordinated entry).
 - The CoC could implement a "diversion pilot" with key homeless system partners as a first step in implementing diversion system-wide. This could include identifying funding to implement a pilot where approaches can be tested and refined for increased scale and replication.

Theme 3: Emergency Shelter & Crisis Resources

Overview of Needs and Gaps

Participants with lived experience, homeless service staff, and community partners shared concerns about the limitations of the existing emergency shelter system in Berks County. Overall, there are not enough beds for those who need them and the beds that do exist are high-barrier and often inaccessible to certain groups, including families, fathers with children, single women, couples, seniors, people with disabilities, and people with pets. Strict rules such as sobriety requirements, time limits, and family separation lead many to avoid shelter entirely. Nearly every person interviewed as part of this plan (including service providers, community partners, and people with lived experience) shared concerns about the overall lack of emergency shelter capacity to meet demand.

In addition to insufficient year-round capacity, there is an urgent need for resources during extreme weather events. Code Blue (cold weather) and Code Red (hot weather) resources are inconsistent and insufficient to meet the needs. Year-round there are very few places where people can go during the day to escape the elements, rest, and access hygiene facilities. Participants emphasized the value of a low-barrier day center that offers showers, restrooms, lockers, and a safe place to connect to services.

Households with medical needs present another challenge. Stakeholders shared concerns about individuals being discharged from hospitals to homelessness when shelters cannot accommodate their health requirements. Stakeholders also expressed concerns about the growing population of older adults experiencing homelessness and shelters being unable to accommodate their specific needs.

Focus group participants shared that many shelters do not operate with a true “housing focus.” While shelters provide food and a place to sleep, participants reported that support to move toward permanent housing is often lacking. Shelter staff were at times perceived as unsympathetic, with rules applied in ways that feel arbitrary or inconsistent. Participants felt that staff could benefit from additional training in trauma-informed care and a housing-focused approach. Participants expressed a need for more case management, advocacy, and direct help from shelter staff with identifying housing options.

Transitional Housing (TH) models can also be a key part of a community's continuum of resources to address homelessness. TH provides temporary housing with supportive services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness with the goal of interim stability and support to successfully move to and maintain permanent housing. Typically, households in TH must move to a different location/unit upon exit (i.e., cannot remain in that unit). Effective Transitional Housing must always be paired with support to help households increase their income and transition to permanent housing upon exit from the program.

It is important to note that expanding emergency shelter or transitional housing resources should always be paired with expanding permanent housing options. Without adequate permanent

Overview of Needs and Gaps (continued)

housing, people can cycle through the homeless system repeatedly. Some emergency shelters and transitional housing programs do not receive any federal or local dollars, which limits CoC coordination and the ability to ensure consistent quality standards. Continued engagement of these providers as partners is critical. Bringing them into CoC discussions, brainstorming solutions, and jointly identifying resources can strengthen the entire system.

Recommendations

- **Identify opportunities and funding to expand year-round emergency shelter capacity, with a priority for low-barrier shelter.**
 - Low-barrier shelters seek to minimize or eliminate requirements that can prevent people from seeking help, such as mandatory sobriety (though they may ask guests to leave if they become disruptive), strict curfews, or ID for entry. While they have rules, they aim to be more accommodating than traditional shelters to help people experiencing homelessness get off the streets. They are designed to be safe and welcoming for vulnerable individuals, including those with physical and behavioral health needs.
- **Identify opportunities and funding to implement non-congregate shelter, even on a small scale (hotels/motels, modular units, leased units).** These resources should be prioritized for households who cannot access shelter due to other barriers (family size/composition, disabilities, outside of Reading). Prioritization of resources should be done in partnership with Coordinated Entry staff whenever possible.
- **Implement strategies to enhance collaboration and partnership for emergency shelter providers within Berks County.**
 - Convene emergency shelter providers via a regularly scheduled forum to discuss system gaps, challenges and solutions.
 - Provide ongoing training to emergency shelter providers related to housing-focused shelter services.
 - Pursue funding or partnership opportunities to embed housing navigators/case managers into shelters who do not currently offer these services.
 - Revisit shelter eligibility rules to reduce exclusion. Provide targeted funding to shelters that commit to a) operating with a low-barrier approach and b) ensuring all staff are adequately trained in serving households experiencing homelessness.
 - Support and train emergency shelter providers to enroll all emergency shelter participants into Coordinated Entry to the extent possible. This ensures that the CoC has a more accurate understanding of the breadth of homelessness within the community and ensures that emergency shelter participants have access to CoC resources.

Recommendations (continued)

- **Establish/expand low-barrier day center(s) with restrooms, showers, lockers, peer supports.**
- **Pilot senior- and disability-accessible shelter beds.** Partner with hospitals, Managed Care Organizations (MCOs), and street medicine teams to develop medical respite beds linked to the shelter system and/or shelter beds designed to specifically meet the needs of seniors and households with disabilities.
- **Coordinate city/county planning for extreme weather (Code Blue and Code Red) operations.** City and county leaders should identify consistent city and county points of contact for Code Blue (cold weather) and Code Red (hot weather) emergency shelter planning. These points of contact should facilitate year-round planning with BCEH and local homeless service providers to ensure increased emergency shelter capacity during extreme weather events.
 - While street medicine and street outreach services are helping to support the health and well-being of unsheltered households, access to immediate shelter throughout the year, especially in times of extreme weather, is necessary.
 - Some communities in Pennsylvania have a formal public ordinance related to when an extreme weather (Code Blue or Code Red) notice will be in effect. Berks County/Reading should consider implementing a formal ordinance that is tied to a public investment in funds for additional shelter space.
 - While there is a need for increased year-round shelter capacity, the county needs a stable funding source to provide shelter during extreme weather. This could be through an allocation of City/County resources or other dedicated source.

Theme 4: Supportive Services, Navigation, & Case Management

Overview of Needs and Gaps

Participants with lived experience and community partners identified a critical lack of housing navigation, case management, and supportive services for people experiencing homelessness in Berks County. Navigating the system was repeatedly described as confusing and overwhelming, with participants saying they felt “bounced around” or “pushed around” between resources. Many reported feeling that no one was helping them find the right resource or guiding them toward housing stability.

Stakeholders expressed a strong desire for dedicated housing navigators or case managers who could help participants connect to housing opportunities and supports such as physical and behavioral health care, employment supports, childcare, and transportation. The quality and intensity of case management appear to vary widely depending on provider, and turnover among staff disrupts progress for clients. As noted in the Emergency Shelter and Crisis Resources section above, participants also emphasized that there are limited day center resources for people experiencing homelessness. A day center could be a centralized hub for housing navigation resources, access to Coordinated Entry, and connections to other community resources.

Regarding individuals or families with behavioral health needs, participants with lived experience and community partners reported that access to mental health services and substance use treatment is a barrier and that resources are very limited. Stakeholders also reported that existing housing resources (emergency and permanent housing resources) do not appear to be equipped to serve individuals with complex behavioral health needs.

Employment barriers were another consistent theme. Participants reported that unstable housing made it difficult to keep a job or seek new work. They cited lack of ID, transportation, showers, childcare, and a place to receive mail as ongoing obstacles. There was strong interest in direct employment pipelines, job training opportunities, and integrated housing-and-work programs that could offer both income and stability.

Overall, the system lacks a coordinated approach to navigation and supportive services, which results in prolonged homelessness and frustration for those seeking help.

Theme 4: Supportive Services, Navigation, & Case Management

Recommendations

- **Implement ongoing, intensive training for homeless service system staff (including emergency shelter and permanent housing providers).** This should include regular, targeted training around topics such as trauma-informed care, housing-focused case management, and working with individuals with complex mental health needs.
- **Pursue funding to create dedicated system navigator positions for individuals assessed through Coordinated Entry.** System navigator positions can be the point of contact for individuals experiencing homelessness as they navigate the homeless service system toward permanent housing. The CoC may wish to explore opportunities to embed system navigators/case management staff within shelters. When possible, hire and train peer specialists with lived experience as part of the supportive service team.
- **Explore opportunities to embed behavioral health and substance use services and/or dedicated staff in shelters, outreach, and housing programs.** This could be a partnership with county mental health system or local health systems.
- **Partner with workforce agencies on integrated housing–employment programs, to build direct employment pipelines.** This should include direct coordination between homeless assistance providers and workforce development partners to support timely connection to employment opportunities. This could include innovative models such as same day pay programs which have been utilized in other areas within Pennsylvania (including Philadelphia and Monroe County). Homeless service providers – especially those providing permanent housing resources - should ensure that all participants they serve are receiving support to increase their earned and non-employment income.

Theme 5: Permanent Housing

Overview of Needs and Gaps

Homeless-Dedicated Permanent Housing

Currently, only 31% of households that access the CoC's Coordinated Entry system exit to permanent housing destinations. Of those who do exit to permanent housing, 57% report receiving some form of housing subsidy, while 43% exit without ongoing assistance. This highlights the need for a stronger continuum of permanent housing options to ensure more households can achieve long-term stability.

Short- to Medium-Term Housing Resources

Short- to medium-term housing resources, paired with supportive services, are needed to support households experiencing homelessness who need some financial assistance and case management to exit homelessness. The most common model for short- to medium-term housing assistance is the Rapid Rehousing (RRH) model which provides short-to-medium-term rental assistance (up to 24 months) paired with supportive services. RRH can currently be funded by both the HUD Continuum of Care (CoC) and Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program. After the assistance ends, the goal is that households can remain in their units or move to another permanent housing resource.

The Berks CoC currently reports approximately 185 units of RRH, many of which are targeted to specific subpopulations such as veterans and families. While these targeted resources are valuable, they leave other groups underserved. The CoC's gaps analysis¹⁰ revealed particularly low access for:

- Domestic Violence survivors – current RRH capacity meets only about 18% of demand.
- Households without children (singles/couples) who are not veterans, youth, or DV survivors - current RRH capacity meets only about 20% of demand.
- Youth – current RRH capacity meets only about 42% of demand.
- Households with no income or income under \$1000/month – 64% of CE households report incomes below \$1,000/month, yet there is only 15% capacity to meet demand for medium-term RRH for this group.

The CoC has some short-term rental assistance programs that work well for households with modest income who may need minimal help to end their homelessness. However, there is a significant gap in medium-term RRH (6–24 months) that can serve all household types, especially those with little or no income. Expansion of RRH resources is essential to addressing this gap. It is also essential that RRH and other short/medium term housing programs provide intensive support to help households increase their incomes, so that they are able to sustain their housing once the rental assistance ends.

As noted in the data section, Coordinated Entry numbers alone do not show the full scope of family homelessness and youth homelessness specifically. Families with children and youth-headed households often double up or stay temporarily with friends or family versus entering the emergency shelter system or experiencing unsheltered homelessness. There is a need to expand resources for unaccompanied youth and families experiencing homelessness who may not meet the HUD definition of homelessness (i.e., families who are double up or couch surfing). This could include both homeless prevention and short- to medium-term housing assistance.

Theme 5: Permanent Housing

Overview of Needs and Gaps (continued)

Long-Term Supportive Housing Resources

Long-term supportive housing resources are needed to support households with disabilities and/or other complex needs who will likely need ongoing, intensive services to end their homelessness. The most common model for long-term supportive housing is the Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) model which pairs long-term rental assistance with intensive supportive services. PSH can currently be funded by both the HUD Continuum of Care (CoC) as well as through VASH (Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, which is PSH dedicated to veterans). CoC-funded PSH must prioritize households who are chronically homeless (homeless for 1 year or more). Participants may remain in PSH as long as they continue to need the services. It is important to note that as needs change, a lower-level intervention may be more appropriate, at which time other options may be explored and decided upon between the project and participant.

The Berks CoC has approximately 259 units of Permanent Supportive Housing. Among those units, 49 units are targeted for veterans, 108 units are targeted for individuals with a substance use disorder, and 41 units are targeted for families with children. While PSH resources for specific subpopulations are very much needed, many households who need PSH resources are unable to access them if they do not fall into a dedicated subpopulation. The households least likely to be able to access PSH resources are households without children (singles/couples) who have a disability but are not veterans and do not have a substance use disorder. Current PSH capacity meets only about 24% of demand for this group¹¹. Overall, there are not enough units available for any subpopulation.

While RRH will be an adequate intervention to assist many households to end their homelessness, some households will also need PSH to achieve long-term housing stability. Based on the number of households in need of homeless assistance, additional PSH capacity is necessary to serve a wider range of household types and subpopulations.

Innovative Housing Models

Stakeholders, including people currently or recently experiencing homelessness, expressed strong interest in expanding the continuum of housing beyond traditional RRH and PSH models, including shared housing models where two or more households share a unit (with or without services, depending on the household's needs), as well as SRO-style housing that offers private rooms with shared common spaces. These models reduce costs (due to smaller ongoing subsidies or no subsidy needed at all because rent is more affordable), create more housing options, and can help combat social isolation.

Landlord Challenges

Even when households secure subsidies such as RRH, PSH, or other subsidized housing, they face major obstacles in finding units within Fair Market Rent and landlords willing to accept rental assistance. Participants stressed the need for landlord engagement strategies and incentives.

Theme 5: Permanent Housing

Overview of Needs and Gaps (continued)

There are also households experiencing homelessness who may never qualify or be prioritized for rental assistance or subsidized housing. For households who have some income to support their own housing (either on their own or in a shared housing arrangement), support with identifying willing landlords and adequate units would be beneficial.

Overall, Berks County needs to expand both the volume and diversity of permanent housing options for households experiencing homelessness, using CoC data to identify the biggest needs and pursuing funding to fill gaps.

Affordable and Attainable Housing

Beyond homeless-dedicated housing, Berks County faces a significant shortage of affordable housing for extremely low- and very low-income households. Nearly every person interviewed as part of the strategic planning process cited concerns about the lack of affordable housing in Berks County and how this is exacerbating the current homelessness crisis.

The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency found that Berks County has a shortage of 7,715 affordable housing units needed for extremely low-income households (with annual income of \$35,000 or less), which places Berks County in the top 20% of PA counties with the most acute affordable housing shortage¹². These estimates are current as of 2020 and the need has likely grown since 2020.

In 2023, Berks County had:

- **38** affordable and available housing units for every 100 extremely low-income households (30% Area Median Income (AMI)).
- **67** affordable and available housing units for every 100 very low-income households (50% AMI).
- **89** affordable and available housing units for every 100 low-income households (80% AMI)¹³.

Long waitlists for public housing and Housing Choice Vouchers leave many households stuck in shelters or doubled up with family and friends. Even when households have a voucher, they often cannot locate a unit within Fair Market Rent that also meets housing quality standards and/or find a landlord willing to accept the subsidy.

As noted in the data section within this plan, wages are not keeping pace with the cost of living. For individuals receiving disability benefits (SSI/SSDI), incomes cannot cover market rents (SSI monthly payments were \$967/month in 2025¹⁴ vs. 1-BR Fair Market Rent in Berks County of \$1,237¹⁵). Seniors and households with chronic disabilities are often living on a fixed income and particularly vulnerable to being priced out of their housing and facing homelessness.

Stakeholders cited multiple systemic barriers to affordable housing production. Zoning restrictions and lack of inclusionary policies limit where and what type of affordable housing can be

Theme 5: Permanent Housing

Overview of Needs and Gaps (continued)

developed. NIMBYism (“Not In My Backyard”) was reported as a major obstacle to developing new affordable or supportive housing projects. City and county partners noted the limited availability of gap financing and challenges accessing Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) allocations, which slows the pipeline for new projects.

The community also faces a high number of vacant and blighted properties, particularly in the City of Reading, which represent an untapped opportunity to create new housing. Stakeholders expressed a desire to see coordinated strategies that pair housing development with neighborhood revitalization efforts, job creation, and anti-displacement protections.

While lack of affordable housing is a growing national issue, local communities can influence strategy and policy to mitigate this issue at the local level.

To effectively help households exit homelessness, communities need adequate housing options for low-income households. A comprehensive set of strategies to create and preserve affordable and deeply affordable housing options is needed to help prevent and end homelessness.

It is beyond the scope of this community plan focused on homelessness to adequately and thoroughly address the complex issue of affordable housing development. However, there are numerous existing resources from national housing experts outlining high-impact strategies to address affordable housing¹⁶. This plan will recommend some high-level general strategies that must be fleshed out further and integrated into existing community and economic development strategies.

Theme 5: Permanent Housing

Recommendations

Homeless-Dedicated Permanent Housing Recommendations:

- **Continue to expand Rapid Re-Housing:** Continue to invest in RRH, with a focus on medium-term RRH (6-24 months of assistance, depending on the individual household's needs). RRH models should include assistance with housing search and supportive services to assist households to stabilize and maintain housing, including a strong emphasis on supporting households to increase income. Because RRH is time limited, effective models will help people find housing that is sustainable in the long run and connect people to resources to help increase their income.
 - The CoC should use data from the gaps analysis and Coordinated Entry to target new investments of RRH (and/or re-design existing RRH inventory where appropriate) to households with the greatest need and the least access to existing resources, with a focus on expanding:
 - Medium-term RRH for all household types with little or no income
 - RRH for DV survivors
 - RRH for youth
- **Continue to expand Permanent Supportive Housing:** Continue to expand PSH units for households needing long-term support to achieve housing stability and avoid future episodes of homelessness.
 - The CoC should use data from the gaps analysis and Coordinated Entry to target new investments of PSH (and/or redesign existing PSH inventory where appropriate) to households with the greatest need and the least access to existing resources, with a focus on expanding PSH that is not limited to specific subpopulations.
- **Pursue additional homeless-dedicated funding:** The CoC should pursue every opportunity to expand its annual allocation of homeless-dedicated funding through HUD and other sources. This could include funding through other sources such as the VA (SSVF and VASH), OMHSAS (opioid housing resources), HHS Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) program resources, Office of Violence Against Women (OVW) resources for survivors of domestic violence, and more. Examples of HUD funding to pursue include the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project (YHDP), CoC Builds, forthcoming "special" NOFOs, etc. Partnerships with the Reading City and Berks County Housing Authorities may also allow you to expand homeless-dedicated resources through special vouchers like FYI (Fostering Youth Independence), FUP (Family Unification Program), and others.
- **Develop Move-On strategies to free up PSH units:** The CoC can work with existing PSH providers to implement Move-On strategies to support households in PSH who no longer need intensive services to transition out of the program into stable housing. The CoC can work with the two local housing authorities to implement Move-On preferences for Housing Choice Vouchers for households exiting PSH Programs. Move-On preferences for HCVs can help households transition in place (remain in their existing unit).

Theme 5: Permanent Housing

Recommendations (continued)

Homeless-Dedicated Permanent Housing Recommendations (continued):

- **Develop a shared housing pilot program:**
 - Shared housing models can maximize housing stock, and support households to live in a setting that meets their social needs. Implementing shared housing does not necessarily require new funding, as it can be implemented within existing funded programs. Implementation of those models could include:
 - Recruiting landlords or acquiring properties for 2–4 person households.
 - Providing support with household matching and shared housing agreements between tenants.
 - Involving people with lived experience in co-design.
 - Shared housing programs could be implemented that serve households who have some income (employment or SSI/SSDI for example) and do not receive a subsidy. This might entail providing services to support roommate matching and shared housing agreements between tenants. Longer-term ongoing support may or may not be needed based on individual households' needs.
- **Identify opportunities to pilot short and medium-term housing opportunities for populations who may not access or be eligible for the traditional homeless assistance system, such as youth, families, and older adults.**
 - This could include partnerships with Children and Youth, Public Housing Agencies, school districts, or the local Area Agency on Aging.
 - This could also include piloting a shallow rent program for households on a fixed income (for example: older adults or households with disabilities receiving SSI/SSDI). Shallow rent programs can be designed to offer a small amount of financial assistance each month (for example \$200-\$300) to help households on a fixed income be able to afford their monthly rent and remain in their homes or move to a new unit. This could also be implemented as a homelessness prevention strategy.
- **Expand landlord partnerships:** It is recommended that the Berks CoC develop a robust initiative to recruit and maintain landlord partnerships. This could include the development of a landlord engagement program by which the CoC "enrolls" landlords to participate, and includes full-time staff, landlord incentives, mediation services to help prevent evictions, and contingency funding for needed repairs beyond normal wear and tear. In return, the CoC provides the landlord with tenants who have access to rental assistance or shallow subsidies and/or supportive services. A wide range of successful landlord engagement models exist across the country that could be replicated in Berks County.

Theme 5: Permanent Housing

Recommendations (continued)

Affordable and Attainable Housing Recommendations:

- **Advocate for a countywide affordable housing strategy tied to economic development efforts.**
 - **This should include the implementation of existing community plans and strategies to address affordable housing.** Berks County and Reading City each have existing community plans that address the need for affordable and attainable housing.
 - Berks County's "Imagine Berks Strategic Economic Development Action Plan" from August 2022 outlines housing as a specific priority area: "Address the county's needs for new housing and redeveloped housing that is accessible and attainable" citing "Early analysis and interviews with stakeholders in Berks County identified low housing supply, lack of quality housing, and affordability as issues that are holding back Berks' economy." This plan identified specific strategies and action steps needed to address affordable and attainable housing needs in Berks County.
 - The "Reading Downtown Strategic Plan" from 2021 specifically includes affordable housing recommendations. The plan notes that "preservation of current housing affordability will be critical to ensuring access to new opportunities and assets downtown, building equity within the downtown community that experiences higher rates of poverty and ensuring that all downtown residents are included in the new prosperity of Reading's renaissance."
 - Any coordinated efforts to implement existing plans must include homeless service providers and stakeholders in planning and implementation.
- **Leverage funding tools (which could include Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), City Revitalization and Improvement Zone (CRIZ) investments, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME), PA Housing Tax Credits, federal/state historic tax credits, New Market Tax Credits, and federal Opportunity Zones) to expand permanently affordable housing.**
 - Work with developers and funders to attract LIHTC projects and expand the pipeline of affordable units.
 - Prioritize adaptive reuse of blighted buildings.
 - Consider community land trust, land bank, and/or shared equity housing models.
 - Pursue opportunities for Community Benefit Agreements with developers to include affordable housing in new projects.
 - Incentivize development of affordable housing for extremely low-income renters.
 - Implement/incentivize set asides in new housing development projects specifically for those exiting homelessness and/or to create PSH, particularly in projects that receive subsidies.
- **Explore zoning and building code reforms and incentives that enable more diverse housing types, including multifamily and accessory dwelling units.**

Theme 6: Community Leadership

Overview of Needs and Gaps

Stakeholders identified a lack of visible leadership and a perception that city and county governments are not fully engaged in leading a homelessness response strategy. Stakeholders highlighted that Berks County lacks visible champions to highlight the issue of homelessness, rally public support and lead coordinated action. Community and philanthropic leaders are willing to support solutions but want a clear understanding of the role they can play and wish to be engaged in strategy development. Community narratives often stigmatize homelessness, framing it as an individual failing rather than a systemic issue, which makes public support for homelessness solutions harder to build.

Theme 6: Community Leadership

Recommendations

- **Build a coordinated city/county leadership structure to address homelessness.**
 - **Request that city and county leadership formally adopt the strategic plan and appoint a lead point of contact at the city and county to work with BCEH and the CoC around implementation of the plan.**
 - Some communities have dedicated homelessness points-of-contact embedded within city and county government - for example, within a dedicated homeless services department or within a health and human services department. We recommend that both the city and county a) decide where coordination around addressing homelessness lives within their government structures and b) designate a primary point of contact to coordinate with BCEH and other community to most effectively address homelessness throughout the city and county.
 - **Establish a county-wide cross-sector task force/leadership table with key leaders from BCEH, city, county, housing authorities, philanthropy, healthcare, faith, business, as well as people with lived experience.**
 - To ensure clear and consistent City/County policies, this task force should establish community-wide rules/policies around issues such as sleeping, overnight parking, encampments and the clearing of, toileting, etc. This would allow individuals to have one set of consistent rules to follow, reducing risk of fines or other consequences.
 - Approaching a coordinated homeless response through a task force could reduce disconnection among city/county leaders and providers and lead to a more coherent approach that factors in the ability, capacity, and roles of the various parties to help address issues like encampments.
- **Launch a public education campaign with data + storytelling** to educate the community on homelessness, reduce stigma and build public will for long-term, sustainable solutions to address homelessness.
- **Create targeted messaging and requests for partners within government, philanthropy, workforce, business, and faith communities, among others, which outline how partners can support the work to address homelessness in Berks County.** This should include concrete and specific ways that leaders within each of these sectors can support the strategies outlined in this plan. The CoC may wish to create a community outreach committee, or embed the work into an existing committee, to lead this work. For example, this committee could craft messaging and specific requests for different sectors, host forums and one-on-one meetings, and advocate for resources to address homelessness.

Investing in Homelessness Solutions and Affordable Housing: Return on Investment

Investing in homelessness prevention, supportive housing for households experiencing homelessness, and affordable housing development is critical for building stronger, healthier communities. These investments address immediate needs by keeping people housed, reducing public costs related to long-term homelessness and creating the foundation for economic stability. By strategically funding these solutions, communities can simultaneously improve individual outcomes and generate broader community benefits.

Investing in homelessness prevention can be a highly cost-effective strategy. For example, a study in Chicago found that families who received short-term financial assistance were 76% less likely to enter an emergency shelter compared with those who did not¹⁷. The study estimated that providing prevention support costs about \$10,300 per person. The estimated benefits (mainly from avoided shelter and other crisis-system expenses) were over \$20,000 per person. By keeping individuals from entering homelessness in the first place, prevention resources reduce the need for costly emergency responses (shelter stays, hospital/emergency services, justice-system involvement) and thus offer a strong return on investment for public funding. Beyond public-system savings, preventing homelessness also helps families avoid the significant personal costs of housing instability, including disruptions to employment, children's schooling, access to social and family supports, and overall health and well-being.

Similarly, investing in supportive housing (stable housing combined with wrap-around services for people experiencing homelessness) yields significant cost savings. A 2022 systematic economic review of studies of U.S. programs using the Housing First model found that the median annual cost per person was roughly \$16,479, the median annual benefit per person was about \$18,247, and the median benefit-to-cost ratio was 1.80:1¹⁸. Many studies also report reductions in incarceration stays, emergency department visits, and hospitalizations among participants in supportive housing, which translate directly into reduced public costs¹⁹. By providing supportive housing rather than leaving individuals cycling through crisis systems, governments and communities save money while improving outcomes.

Finally, investing in affordable housing is not just a strategy to reduce costs - it is also an economic development strategy. Investing in affordable housing fosters long-term economic and social stability. Safe, affordable housing directly impacts wealth building through homeownership; job creation in construction, real estate, and local businesses; health outcomes by reducing stress and chronic conditions linked to unstable housing; and educational success, as children in stable homes perform better in school. In effect, housing investment becomes the platform for workforce development, business attraction, and vibrant local economies - meaning that funding prevention, supportive housing, and affordable housing solutions support not only human-service goals but also broader economic vitality.

Next Steps

It is imperative that the Berks community come together with a shared goal to address homelessness to move forward the goals outlined in this plan.

While the needs and recommendations outlined in this plan are robust, the Berks County Continuum of Care (with backbone support from BCEH) is well-positioned to make significant progress on these goals if the entire CoC and community work together and share responsibility for the implementation of the plan.

An early step the CoC can take to implement this plan is examining its existing committee structure and ensuring that each strategy is owned by a committee or workgroup. The CoC should review the recommendations included in the plan, set short-, medium-, and long-term goals, identify which committee/workgroup will own each goal, and expand membership as needed to ensure a range of voices, experiences, and expertise are incorporated. To move forward on implementation, the CoC should also establish reporting and accountability structures and provide key support to help the committees/workgroups in making and measuring progress.

The success of this plan will depend on the Berks community coming together to own this plan and support its implementation. Implementation of this plan must include a range of stakeholders whose work intersects with the issues of homelessness, including government leaders, business leaders, philanthropy partners, faith communities, community members, persons with lived experience of homelessness, homeless service providers, health/mental health partners, workforce partners, and many others. This plan is meant to be a living document to help jumpstart and guide the community's work together to address homelessness by laying out a path forward that the community can work together to implement.

As an immediate next step, we recommend that the CoC identify short-term quick wins within the plan that could be implemented relatively quickly. We also recommend that the CoC identify several high-impact strategies within the plan to prioritize.

Low or No Cost Strategies

There are several strategies within the plan that could be implemented for low or no cost that the CoC could consider implementing quickly. Many of these strategies involve enhancing existing collaboration and/or restructuring existing work for maximum impact. For example:

- Assign committees to spearhead implementation of each set of recommendations within the strategic plan.
- Request that city and county leadership formally adopt the strategic plan and appoint a lead point of contact at the city and county to work with BCEH and the CoC around implementation of the plan.
- Establish a county-wide cross-sector task force/leadership table with key leaders from BCEH, city, county, housing authorities, philanthropy, healthcare, faith, business, as well as people with lived experience.
- Create regular communication mechanisms to engage community partners in conversations around community needs and strategies, and to keep community partners updated on the progress on the strategic plan.

Next Steps

Low or No Cost Strategies (continued)

- Launch a funding strategy group that brings together the various organizations and departments that oversee CoC, ESG, HOME, PHARE, Home4Good, HAP, and other funds that can be used for homeless assistance.
 - Note: This could be a sub-group of the task force/leadership table mentioned above.
- Re-establish the CoC's lived experience advisory group to ensure the perspectives of those seeking and receiving assistance is incorporated into decision-making.
- Immediately begin tracking households who come to Coordinated Entry access sites who are at risk of homelessness and record outcomes from these interactions.
- Coordinate city/county planning for extreme weather (Code Blue and Code Red) operations.
- Create targeted messaging and requests for partners within government, philanthropy, workforce, business, and faith communities, among others, which outline how partners can support the work to address homelessness in Berks County.

High-Impact Strategies

There are several strategies within the plan that could have a significant impact on the overall homeless response system, including reducing the number of households entering shelters and moving households quickly out of homelessness, which would allow the CoC to use existing resources more strategically. For example:

- Create a countywide Housing Stabilization Fund with flexible, coordinated dollars.
- Provide training to all homeless system partners (with a focus on emergency shelters and coordinated entry access sites) to embed diversion and housing problem-solving strategies as standard practice for households experiencing a housing crisis.
- Identify opportunities and funding to implement non-congregate shelter, even on a small scale (hotels/motels, modular units, leased units).
- Establish/expand low-barrier day center(s) with restrooms, showers, lockers, peer supports.
- Pilot senior- and disability-accessible shelter beds.
- Explore opportunities to embed behavioral health and substance use services and/or dedicated staff in shelters, outreach, and housing programs.
- Develop a shared housing pilot program.
- Partner with workforce agencies on integrated housing–employment programs, to build direct employment pipelines.

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Appendix A: Funding Sources

Funding Sources

Below is a chart of potential funding sources related to the identified focus areas within the strategic plan:

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
HUD Continuum of Care (CoC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Housing Resources (PSH, RRH, TH-RRH) • Supportive Services (Coordinated Entry) • Planning grant (stipends for persons with lived experience and funds for training to support CoC system) <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CoC Structure and Collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-establish the CoC’s lived experience advisory group to ensure authentic voice in decision-making. • Supportive Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated housing navigator positions for individuals assessed through Coordinated Entry. • Training for homeless service system staff. • Permanent Housing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to expand RRH. • Continue to expand PSH. • Develop a shared housing pilot. • Develop Move-On strategies to free up PSH units.
HUD Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG)	<p>Emergency Shelter, Street Outreach, Homeless Prevention, Rapid Rehousing</p> <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the Berks County Redevelopment Authority and City of Reading Community Development Office.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention/Diversion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand dedicated prevention/diversion resources. • Emergency Shelter: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify funding to expand year-round emergency shelter capacity and Code Blue/Code Red capacity. • Identify opportunities and funding to implement non-congregate shelter, even on a small scale. • Permanent Housing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to expand RRH.
Home4Good	<p>Flexible funding source through Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CoC Structure and Collaboration

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
	<p>Three program goals are: 1) Prevention/Diversion; 2) Innovative Solutions; 3) Critical Needs.</p> <p>Typically, the CoC will accept applications based on the amount of funds available and will prioritize applications for funding based on CoC needs and priorities.</p> <p>This resource can be used to fill gaps that other funding sources cannot fill.</p> <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-establish the CoC’s lived experience advisory group to ensure authentic voice in decision-making. • Prevention/Diversion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a countywide Housing Stabilization Fund. • Expand eviction prevention, landlord mediation, and legal assistance resources. • Provide training to all homeless system partners to embed diversion and housing-problem solving strategies. • Emergency Shelter: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify funding to expand year-round emergency shelter capacity and Code Blue/Code Red capacity. • Identify opportunities and funding to implement non-congregate shelter, even on a small scale. • Establish/expand low-barrier day center(s) with restrooms, showers, lockers, peer supports. • Supportive Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated housing navigator positions for individuals assessed through Coordinated Entry. • Ongoing training for homeless service system staff. • Permanent Housing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue new housing models, such as shared housing. • Identify opportunities to pilot short and medium-term housing opportunities for populations who may not access or be

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
		<p>eligible for the traditional homeless assistance system, such as youth, families, and older adults.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand landlord partnerships
<p>Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement (PHARE)</p>	<p>PHARE is the PA Housing Trust Fund dollars awarded through Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.</p> <p>2025 PHARE Funding Priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preservation and Rehabilitation • Rental Housing Creation • Homelessness Prevention • Innovative Housing Solutions (including Eviction diversion and prevention programming; outreach and supportive services to tenants; legal assistance or representation; smart technology; landlord/tenant mediation; MDJ partnership programs; housing solutions to address housing needs for at-risk communities including shared housing, elder cottage, etc.) • Homeownership • Housing Counseling and Financial Education • Health for Housing Investments • 9% Tax Credit Projects • 4% Tax Credit Projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CoC Structure and Collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-establish the CoC’s lived experience advisory group to ensure authentic voice in decision-making. • Prevention/Diversion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a countywide Housing Stabilization Fund • Expand eviction prevention, landlord mediation, and legal assistance resources • Provide training to all homeless system partners to embed diversion and housing-problem solving strategies • Emergency Shelter: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify funding to expand year-round emergency shelter capacity and Code Blue/Code Red capacity. • Identify opportunities and funding to implement non-congregate shelter, even on a small scale. • Establish/expand low-barrier day center(s) with restrooms, showers, lockers, peer supports. • Supportive Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated housing navigator positions for individuals assessed through Coordinated Entry. • Ongoing training for homeless service system staff. • Permanent Housing:

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
	<p><i>In Pennsylvania these funds are administered by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue new housing models, such as shared housing. • Identify opportunities to pilot short and medium-term housing opportunities for populations who may not access or be eligible for the traditional homeless assistance system, such as youth, families, and older adults. • Expand landlord partnerships
<p>HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New construction and rehabilitation of housing units for affordable rental or homeownership opportunities, including site acquisition or improvement/demolition for building. • Assistance to Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDO) engaged in eligible CHDO rental or homeownership projects. • Tenant-based rental assistance for up to 2 years, which may be renewed. <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the Berks County Redevelopment Authority and City of Reading Community Development Office.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Housing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing development • Tenant-based rental assistance.
<p>Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing rehabilitation • Public services • Community facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Housing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing development

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure improvement (water, sewer, storm water) • Streets and sidewalks • Economic development • Planning <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the Berks County Redevelopment Authority and City of Reading Community Development Office.</i></p>	
<p>City/county funds</p>	<p>Many CoCs and homeless service providers solicit city/county funds to fill key funding gaps. The opportunities for this vary greatly by community. A strategy that some communities find successful is to have a list of 2-3 targeted asks for city/county leaders, and then facilitating meetings, forums, or community advocacy initiatives to pursue funding for these targeted asks.</p>	<p>Most recommendations within this plan could be funded through city or county dollars. Some specific strategies might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency Shelter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify funding to expand year-round emergency shelter capacity and Code Blue/Code Red capacity. • Identify opportunities and funding to implement non-congregate shelter, even on a small scale. • Establish/expand low-barrier day center(s) with restrooms, showers, lockers, peer supports. • Permanent Housing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify opportunities to pilot short and medium-term housing opportunities for populations who may not access or be eligible for the traditional homeless assistance system, such as youth, families, and older adults.

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
<p>PHA Voucher Programs and Subsidies</p>	<p>This includes vouchers that are either dedicated to people experiencing homelessness or can be prioritized for people experiencing homelessness: Mainstream vouchers, Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers, Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative vouchers, Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV), Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Vouchers.</p> <p>This can also include public housing and section 8, if the PHA includes a preference for people experiencing homelessness in their Administrative Plan.</p> <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the Berks County Housing Authority and Reading Housing Authority.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Housing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue additional homeless-dedicated funding. • Develop Move-On strategies to free up PSH units
<p>Health/mental health system partnerships</p>	<p>CoCs and homeless service providers can create formal partnerships with the health/mental health systems to coordinate and integrate services (e.g. co-locating services, joint applications for funding, pilot projects to serve people with behavioral health needs who are experiencing homelessness)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention/Diversion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-system coordination to prevent discharge to homelessness • Training for homeless system staff • Emergency Shelter: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot senior- and disability-accessible shelter beds • Explore opportunities to embed behavioral health and substance use services and/or dedicated staff in

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
		<p>shelters, outreach, and housing programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore opportunities to embed mental health resources and/or staff with mental health training into shelter, permanent housing, and street outreach.
<p>Corporate or private philanthropy dollars</p>	<p>Many CoCs and homeless service providers solicit corporate or private philanthropy dollars to fill key funding gaps. The opportunities for this vary greatly by community. A strategy that some communities find successful is to have a list of 2-3 targeted asks for corporate/private philanthropy opportunities and targeting proposals around these 2-3 key areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most recommendations within this plan could be funded through corporate or private philanthropy dollars.
<p>Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH)</p>	<p>PATH funds services for people with serious mental illness (SMI) experiencing homelessness. This includes the following services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach • Screening and diagnostic treatment • Habilitation and rehabilitation • Community mental health • Substance use disorders treatment • Referrals for primary health care, job training, educational services, and housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive Services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore opportunities to embed behavioral health and substance use services and/or dedicated staff in shelters, outreach, and housing programs • Street outreach and mental health supports

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing services <p><i>In Pennsylvania these funds are administered by the PA Department of Human Services. Berks County does not currently receive PATH funds.</i></p>	
<p>PA Homeless Assistance Program (HAP)</p>	<p>This State funded program serves households experiencing homelessness, with a more flexible eligibility definition than other homeless dedicated sources. HAP services include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case Management • Rental Assistance • Bridge Housing • Emergency Shelter • Innovative Supportive Housing Service <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the County of Berks MH/DD Department in partnership with the Berks County Redevelopment Authority.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most recommendations within this plan (apart from affordable housing development) could be funded through HAP.
<p>Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)</p>	<p>Services and activities addressing employment, education, income and asset building services, housing, nutrition, emergency services, and/or healthcare based on community needs assessments conducted by the local entities.</p>	<p>This will depend on the locally established priorities based on the community’s needs assessment but could include enhancing supportive services for people experiencing homelessness, increasing housing resources, and emergency assistance for people experiencing homelessness.</p>

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
	<p>CSBG funds may not be used for the purchase or improvement of land, or the purchase, construction or permanent improvement (other than low-cost residential weatherization or other energy-related home repairs) of any building or other facility.</p> <p>Note that an allocation of CSBG is awarded to the local community action agency, so any strategies related to prioritization for CSBG would need to be in coordination with the community action agency.</p> <p><i>In Berks County these funds are administered by the Berks County Community Action Program.</i></p>	
<p>City Revitalization and Improvement Zone (CRIZ) program</p>	<p>The City Revitalization and Improvement Zone (CRIZ) program, established by the Pennsylvania law in 2013, is designed to stimulate economic development and job creation within designated zones.</p> <p>These zones capture and reinvest state and local taxes generated within them to support various economic development projects.</p>	<p>This will depend on the locally established priorities for the CRIZ, but could be used for affordable housing development.</p>

Potential Funding Sources	Potential Uses & Lead Agency	Strategic Plan Strategies that Funding Source Could Support:
	<p>Normally, when businesses grow and generate more tax dollars, most of that increased revenue flows directly to Harrisburg. The CRIZ changes that. It enables Reading to retain the growth in these tax revenues and reinvest them in local economic development activities.</p> <p>Taxes captured within these zones are utilized for to pay the debt-service on new construction, renovation of existing buildings, and infrastructure improvements.</p> <p>This will result in increased tax revenue to support public services, increased property values, and result in a better quality of life for residents and the region. This increase in qualified tax dollars is returned to the CRIZ Authority (governing board of the CRIZ) on an annual basis and can be used for various community improvements as prioritized by the community.</p> <p><i>In Reading these funds are administered by the City of Reading Revitalization and Improvement Zone Authority.</i></p>	