

California Cohort 2 100-Day Challenge Case Studies

Sonoma County: Partnering with Housing Authorities to Address Youth Homelessness

The Sonoma County 100-Day Challenge involved the strong support and engagement of two local Housing Authorities. The partnership between Housing Authorities, non-profit service providers, and government agencies was essential for increase housing accessibility for transitional age youth (TAY) experiencing homelessness.

HOW SONOMA COUNTY MADE IT HAPPEN

Sonoma County set out during its 100-Day Challenge to increase connections to housing for transitional age youth (TAY), at the same time working to reshape and reimagine the local homeless response system to better serve this population. The Team's focus on this population came from the recognition that TAY often face a number of barriers to accessing housing resources, including lack of affordable housing stock and landlord hesitancy to serve unaccompanied youth. Sonoma County recognized the need for new partnerships and innovative approaches in order to create new or expanded housing options that are truly accessible for TAY experiencing homelessness.

The 100-Day Challenge Team engaged the Housing Authorities for both the City of Santa Rosa and the County of Sonoma early on in the initiative. These partnerships proved to be crucial for identifying additional housing resources for TAY. Sonoma's Housing Authorities were able to dedicate over 30 housing vouchers specifically for TAY experiencing homelessness, working in partnership with local non-profits to provide security deposits, supportive services, and case management for those in the process of being housed. The Housing Authorities were also involved in identifying landlords willing to accept housing vouchers held by TAY.

At a systems level, Team members from the local Housing Authorities joined forces with representatives from non-profit service providers and government agencies to help reimagine the homeless response system to better serve TAY experiencing homelessness. Members of Sonoma's 100-Day Challenge Team worked together to help "de-silo" the homeless response system, including identifying areas where increased coordination and collaboration with Housing Authorities can improve the housing process for TAY.

Key Takeaways:

- Housing Authorities have access to resources and key insights into the housing process that can help address TAY homelessness.
- Local data can help demonstrate existing housing need for TAY and gain buy-in for collaboration from Housing Authority partners.
- Professional relationships often already exist that can be leveraged to help bring Housing Authorities to the table for TAY initiatives.
- Engaging Housing Authorities in planning and decision-making processes helps to increase buy-in and develop a shared sense of responsibility for housing TAY experiencing homelessness.
- Partnerships with local Housing Authorities can help identify existing resources such as housing vouchers that can be dedicated to populations of focus such as TAY.
- Community partners can offer case management, supportive services, and other resources to help Housing Authorities effectively serve TAY using housing vouchers.

LESSONS LEARNED

“When you have collaboration between Housing Authorities and service providers, this is a tremendous and powerful opportunity to house youth.” – Tom Bieri, Executive Director, Community Support Network

1) Utilize Data to Demonstrate Need to Housing Authority Partners

Sonoma County utilized local data to help engage cross-system partners around the issue of youth homelessness and to make the case for agencies such as local Housing Authorities to participate in the 100-Day Challenge. Sonoma County’s 2020 Homeless Youth Needs Assessment found 304 youth experiencing homelessness in the community, of whom 84% were in unsheltered situations.¹ The assessment also showed that youth who are Hispanic/Latinx, African American, Native American, and who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) are disproportionately impacted by homelessness. The Team utilized this data to help demonstrate the urgent need for cross-systems collaboration in order to identify new and expanded housing options for TAY, with a particular focus on LGBTQ+ and Black, Indigenous or People of Color (BIPOC) youth. This data helped cross-system partners such as Housing Authorities understand the existing housing gap for TAY experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County and to recognize the importance of their involvement in the 100-Day Challenge as experts in local housing resources.

2) Leverage Existing Relationships Between Homeless Services Providers and Housing Authorities

Sonoma County was able to build upon existing relationships to engage local Housing Authorities early in the 100-Day Challenge. One of Sonoma’s key stakeholders in the planning and development of the 100-Day Challenge already had a long-standing relationship with the Sonoma County Housing Authority and was able to quickly identify and recruit a representative from the agency to serve on the 100-Day Challenge Team. This Team member from the Sonoma County Housing Authority was chosen as one of the community’s two Team Leaders, a role in which she was able to serve as a vocal champion for the 100-Day Challenge. This Team Lead helped increase community awareness and commitment to the 100-Day Challenge by participating in interviews with local news media and recruiting additional members to the Team – including her counterpart at the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Rosa. Representatives from both of Sonoma County’s local Housing Authorities came to the 100-Day Challenge as early champions for cross-systems collaboration to reach the community’s goal of improving housing accessibility for TAY experiencing homelessness.

3) Authentically Engage Housing Authorities as Key Partners in Decision-Making Processes

The Sonoma County 100-Day Challenge Team was able to forge strong partnerships with local Housing Authorities by authentically engaging them as key partners in planning and decision-making processes to address TAY homelessness. As part of the 100-Day Challenge, Housing Authority partners signed a Release of Information (ROI) so that they could contribute to TAY-specific data collection and sharing efforts. This ROI also allowed Housing Authorities to participate in weekly case conferencing calls to coordinate housing and services for TAY experiencing homelessness. Both local Housing Authorities are also key partners in the newly created Sonoma County TAY Working Group, which met weekly during the 100-Day Challenge and will continue to meet monthly to address the micro and macro level needs of TAY experiencing homelessness in the community. Engaging local Housing Authorities in youth-focused planning and decision-making processes helped to create genuine buy-in and a shared sense of responsibility between Housing Authorities, non-profit service providers, and government agencies for creating new and expanded housing options for TAY.

¹ Sonoma County Office of Education, “Homeless Youth: Sonoma County,” 2020, https://www.scoe.org/files/SC_Homeless_Youth_Needs_Assessment_Infographic_2020_2.pdf

4) Work with Housing Authorities to Maximize Existing Resources for TAY Experiencing Homelessness

The 100-Day Challenge created an opportunity for non-profit service providers and government agencies in Sonoma County to learn more about Housing Authorities resources and how they can be utilized to serve TAY experiencing homelessness. The 100-Day Challenge Team recognized that the lack of affordable housing units in Sonoma County meant that they would have to think creatively about identifying and utilizing new resources to increase housing options for TAY. Local Housing Authorities were able to offer existing housing vouchers that could be dedicated to TAY experiencing homelessness and worked with members of the 100-Day Challenge Team to help identify eligible youth and quickly connect them to a voucher. With the help of the local Housing Authorities almost half of the TAY housed during the 100-Day Challenge were assisted with a housing subsidy or voucher. At the end of the 100 days, an additional 32 TAY had already received housing choice vouchers and were actively looking for housing. This partnership with local Housing Authorities to dedicate housing vouchers to TAY helped the community overcome existing housing inventory limitations and recognize that resources do exist in the community that can be leveraged in new ways to serve this population of focus.

5) Complement Housing Authority Resources with Additional Community Supports

The Sonoma County 100-Day Challenge Team ensured that resources were coordinated across agencies to support Housing Authority partners in meeting the comprehensive needs of TAY experiencing homelessness. Youth-serving partners from across the community were able to help identify and refer TAY experience homelessness for housing vouchers available through the local Housing Authorities. Team members were able to secure incentive funding for landlords willing to house TAY with vouchers and utilized flyers and interviews with local new media to help recruit interested landlords. All TAY experiencing homelessness who were referred to housing during the 100-Day Challenge were also connected with supportive services teams to help with housing search activities, transitioning into housing, and maintaining housing stability. This collaborative approach helped break down silos so that no one agency was working alone to house TAY experiencing homelessness. Housing Authorities, non-profit service providers, and government agencies were able to create the foundation for a coordinated youth service network during the 100-Day Challenge so that the community can move forward quickly and efficiently to help as many TAY transition out of homelessness and into permanent housing solutions as possible.