

Charles Francis:

... Council of State Governments Justice Center. We're so pleased you could join us today on our webinar, Using American Rescue Plan and CARES Act Housing Resources to Support Reentry. We're excited to share with you today what both the Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as two communities, are doing to create housing opportunities for people who have been involved with the justice system. Because as so many of you know, housing is such a fundamental ingredient in reentry. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

Just wanted to quickly let everybody know that this meeting is going to be recorded, so here's the notice here for your perusal. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

And so a little bit about us. We are the Council of State Governments Justice Center. We're a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization combining the power of a membership association, serving state officials in all branches of government, with policy and research expertise to develop strategies that increase public safety and strengthen communities. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

Our outline for our presentation today: after a brief welcome and some introductions, we'll hear a message from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development about the work that they're doing both to prioritize people who've been involved with the justice system for housing as well as to look across HUD programs and beyond to see what else we can do to reduce barriers for folks being able to connect with housing. After that, I will share briefly about some of the key funding streams that are available under the American Rescue Plan for housing. And then we'll hear from two different communities, in Montana and Texas, about how they have used federal resources to create housing opportunities for people in reentry. And then with the time that we have left, we'll have a question and answer session. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

Our presenters today, in addition to myself, we have Richard Cho, a senior advisor with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. We have Ann Miller, a managing attorney with the Tribal Defender's Office of The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. And then we have a cross-system panel from Austin and Travis County, Texas, Dylan Shubitz, Director of Intake and Special Programs for the Housing Authority of the City of Austin, Victoria Perez, Housing Manager for the Housing Authority of Travis County, Jennifer Sowinski, Clinical Operations Manager for the Downtown Austin Community Court, and Melissa Shearer, Director of the Office of the Travis County Mental Health Public Defender. Next slide.

Charles Francis:

We have a lot of folks joining us today, if you would just take a minute and introduce yourself in the chat. Just list your name, what agency you come from, and what jurisdiction you're coming from. Looking forward to getting to know who's in the room here with us. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

Without further ado, I'd like to turn it over to Richard Cho with a special message from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Richard Cho:

Thank you so much, Charlie. As Charlie mentioned, I'm Richard Cho and I serve as Senior Advisor for Housing and Services to Secretary Marcia Fudge at the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Richard Cho:

First of all, I want to thank Department of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, as well as the CSG Justice Center for including us in this webinar today. I want to just share that among the many priorities that HUD is looking to advance and that are of high concern to Secretary Fudge, everything from homelessness to meeting the rental housing crisis in America to increasing home ownership rates particularly among black Americans, I think one of the top priorities is really how we can meet the housing needs of people who are formerly incarcerated and justice system involved in this country. This is a priority that's actually reflected in HUD's new strategic plan that we actually launched a couple of weeks ago, and it sits under the first goal of our strategic plan, which is to support underserved communities and in particular to advance housing justice.

Richard Cho:

And why, I guess is the question, why have we put reentry housing needs at the top of our priority list? There are a number of reasons. First, we know that there are significant racial disparities as well as disparities among people with disabilities involved in the justice system and that we know that meeting the housing needs is part of our overall administration-wide strategy to advance equity across the country. But also, we know that people who are formerly incarcerated experience homelessness and housing insecurity at disproportionate rates. As a recent article that we posted this week in our biweekly blog post known as The Edge, which is a publication of HUD's Policy Development and Research Office, we know that formerly incarcerated people are 10 times more likely to experience homelessness than people who have not had justice system involvement, and that more than 50% of people who are in the homeless system report having had some historical experience in the criminal justice system, many communities even indicating that up to a fifth, 20%, of their homeless population are people who are actually recently been released from prison or jail into the community.

Richard Cho:

We know that when people who are formerly incarcerated experience housing insecurity or homelessness, they're much at higher risk of recidivism and returning back to the criminal justice system. We also know there's compelling evidence that housing is foundational to successful reentry and that when you can provide stable housing to people who are returning to the communities for prison or jail, that actually can increase public safety.

Richard Cho:

Now, the challenge with meeting reentry housing needs is that there is not a single dedicated funding stream or program at HUD that can meet the housing needs of people who are formerly incarcerated. The challenge, or perhaps the opportunity really, is to figure out how to leverage HUD's other existing programs that are for people who are either low income or people who are experienced or at risk of homelessness to be able to meet those housing needs. But, of course, there are also challenges to being able to tap into and leverage those other funding streams and housing programs. In particular, many of HUD's significant programs that meet affordable and rental housing needs, public housing for example. Our housing choice voucher programs, our multifamily housing programs have all had both statutory as well as regulatory barriers to accessing those programs because of either mandatory prohibitions against people who have certain kinds of criminal convictions, but also, historically, the broad statutory discretion that has been afforded to housing owners, assisted housing owners or public housing authorities who administer those funds locally, where they have pretty broad discretion to screen people out based on their criminal records.

Richard Cho:

On the other hand, HUD has over the years actually provided guidance indicating that there are certain ways that criminal records should not be served as a barrier to people who are accessing those programs. In 2015, HUD issue guidance saying that arrest records may not be used in tenant screening and selection. In 2016, HUD's Office of our General Counsel actually issued a memo indicating that when criminal records are used in an overbroad way, essentially when housing owners or housing authorities or even private landlords look at criminal records just at face value without taking into consideration other circumstances, they may be in violation of the Fair Housing Act because of the significant racial disparities as well as disparities among people with disabilities in the justice system.

Richard Cho:

In other words, if you blanketly deny people housing on the basis of just the criminal record alone, you are essentially maybe de facto screening people out for being black or brown or for having a disability. So that is why, actually, last week, our secretary issued an internal directive that she wants to make sure that across all of our regulations, all of our policy guidance, all of our subregulatory policy documents, HUD can conduct a systematic review to ensure that we are doing everything we can within what is permitted under statute and law to be as inclusive as possible with regard to our programs. The memo she issued last week charges us to over a six-

month period look at every single regulation policy document, ECHO systems document to ensure that we are reinforcing the notion that people should not be screened out simply because of what's on their criminal record at face value, but really that any HUD-assisted housing owner needs to take a full individualized assessment of risk and take into account whether a conviction actually poses any risk or threat to persons or property, how long ago that conviction took place, whether there's been any evidence of rehabilitation or employment or other circumstances.

Richard Cho:

So we are taking a comprehensive look at all of our policies and programs to ensure that we can be as inclusive as possible of people who have had involvement in the criminal justice system. I think the most, I think, opportunity that we have, actually, is to be able to leverage some of the resources that have been provided to the American Rescue Plan as well as the CARES Act that actually are not only additional and new resources but also provide some programmatic changes that enable us to better serve people who are formerly incarcerated. Through the American Rescue Plan, HUD actually awarded 70,000 emergency housing vouchers to communities that can serve people who are currently experiencing homelessness or people who are at risk of homelessness as well as those fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence or other gender-based violence.

Richard Cho:

Those emergency housing vouchers are, I think, not only a windfall in terms of additional resources to be able to meet the needs of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, but also create a unique opportunity to be able to serve people who are being released from prison or jail who are at risk of homelessness. We are very excited to hear about communities, such as you'll hear today, who are taking advantage of that opportunity. Secretary Fudge actually issued a letter last July, in 2021, really encouraging housing authorities and continuance of care and communities across the country to use these American Rescue Plan resources to help meet the needs of people who are returning to communities who are at risk of homelessness. I'm excited to hear about one of those communities today.

Richard Cho:

In addition, we provided additional housing resources to tribal nations to help them meet a variety of different housing needs. I think you'll also hear about an opportunity here where one particular tribal nation has looked at some of the resources we've provided to help meet the housing needs of people who are returning back from prison or jail in their community as well.

Richard Cho:

But looking ahead, HUD will continue to take action to ensure that we are meeting reentering housing needs. We are going to be working hand in hand with the Department of Justice to provide more tools in how communities can better assess who among people leaving prison or jail are currently homeless or at risk of homelessness, as well as the spotlighted hold up examples of successful partnerships

between public housing authorities, continuance of care, tribal nations, and reentry programs who are really using HUD's programs as well as DOJ resources in innovative ways to meet reentry housing needs.

Richard Cho:

And we are going to continue to look at how we can, again, listening to people with lived experience who are formerly incarcerated themselves, to hear from them what's working well to help inform the ways that we operate our programs as well as to look at ways that we can provide additional guidance and support to help communities to meet re-entry housing needs. So I'm very excited about this webinar today. I want to thank BJA as well as CSG Justice Center for including us today. I'm very much looking forward to hearing your presentation today. Charlie, I'll turn it back to you.

Charles Francis:

Thank you so much, Richard. It's really exciting to hear all the work HUD is doing to reduce barriers to housing for people who've been involved with the justice system, as well as to help prioritize some of these new and valuable housing resources for the same population. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

So, I just want to spend a few minutes going over what some of these resources are to level set for the rest of the presentation. I'm just going to talk a little bit about a few key funding streams for housing, what they can be used for, and really the fundamental importance of partnerships across different systems, criminal justice, housing, and behavioral health. And I think that's one theme that we're going to keep coming back to today. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

The American Rescue Plan is a wide-ranging economic stimulus bill that I'm sure everyone is at least somewhat familiar with. It invests in a wide range of different things, but including housing, and it's really a once-in-a-generation investment in housing. We don't see more than \$12 billion of federal resources invested in new housing programs every day. These resources can be used for really three key things that all relate to creating housing opportunities for people in reentry: building more housing, being able to connect people with housing and help them stay in that housing, and also subsidizing housing, helping people access housing that's already there and helping making that housing affordable.

Charles Francis:

As Richard noted, it hasn't always been historically easy to prioritize people with justice involvement for HUD housing programs for a variety of reasons. And so, it's really exciting to see the opportunity that we have with these resources to really do that in some new ways. Next slide.

Charles Francis:

The funding stream I most want to highlight, particularly because it's going to be the focus of Austin and Travis County's presentation, are the emergency housing vouchers. Richard touched on the fact that HUD Secretary Fudge last year put out some guidance really encouraging communities to prioritize people in reentry for these vouchers. It's great to see that coming from HUD. They're a wonderful resource that can really help meet immediate housing needs, help connect people with housing, keep them in that housing, and most importantly, make housing affordable.

Charles Francis:

One thing to note is that typically we're used to housing choice vouchers being administered through public housing authorities. That's still the case, but there is a twist with the EHV program. In most cases, referrals have to come through the continuum of care, what's called the coordinated entry system, which is a community-wide system of intake and prioritization to help quantify the housing and service needs of folks that connect to the system and the community and really help prioritize people for assistance, connect them with the housing that meets their needs. So HUD is really focusing here on trying to use that community-wide needs assessment and intake process to get these EHV's to the people who need them most. Next slide.

Charles Francis:

Another key funding stream is HOME-ARP. Now, the HOME program itself is a formula grant that HUD's been giving out for many years now, but this is a new increment just for the ARP program. It's also \$5 billion nationally. HOME-ARP is actually allocated to state, county, and municipal governments. The target population is also people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, but a real difference here, HOME-ARP can still be used for constructing housing, supportive services, and other expenses. But really, it's difficult to come across funding sources that allow new construction and rehabilitation of deeply affordable housing. So we'd really like to recommend that communities, as much as they can, prioritize HOME-ARP resources for that sort of thing. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

And then finally, a third major funding stream comes through the Department of the Treasury State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds. It's a much larger pot of money, of course. It's also allocated among a much larger range of competing uses. But again, these are allocated to state, local, and tribal governments. There's a real good opportunity, which I'll get into in a minute here, to really sit down at the table with your state government or with your local government, whoever is receiving these funds, and be able to make the case that they should be allocated to housing and allocated towards people in reentry. Communities are still going to be figuring out how to spend down these funds over the next couple of years, so there is a particular opportunity here. Next slide.

Charles Francis:

But at the core, this is all about partnership building, and especially partnerships that are built and nurtured over a long period of time across systems, again, as you're going to hear from our colleagues in Austin. It's really important because that really helps create buy-in to prioritize housing resources for people who've been involved with the justice system, and it really helps create understanding that this is not just another population that we have to serve with very limited resources, but in fact, that folks with justice involvement may be the same folks that people in the housing and homeless assistance system or the behavioral health or the healthcare system wants to serve. It's really a shared population, and the more you can cultivate that sense of shared mission, the better.

Charles Francis:

And so, building partnerships, it's important with a range of different stakeholders, and there's a different angle for the partnership building for each one. With local government, as you just saw with the Treasury State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds and HOME-ARP, partnership building is most important to help emphasize prioritizing funds for the people that we serve. But partnerships with housing developers are also very important because we need to create and build more housing. In particular, as new construction projects or rehabilitation projects are being contemplated, strong partnerships and relationships with developers can help to allocate and set aside housing units for people in the reentry process.

Charles Francis:

Landlords are another very essential partner. In just about every community, small landlords in particular and private landlords in general control majority of the housing stock. So it's essential to build these partnerships. In particular and especially if you have an emergency housing voucher, you still need to use that voucher somewhere. And so, landlord partnerships are essential. But in addition to education, some great strategies to build partnerships with landlords can include providing small financial incentives for leasing or what some communities have done, they've actually established risk mitigation insurance funds, basically that property owners could draw on an event of damages or unpaid rents. Much more to talk about on that topic, but there are some really great strategies out there that communities are doing to build these partnerships.

Charles Francis:

And then finally, building partnerships with affordable housing providers themselves. This ties directly into HUD's latest efforts that Richard was just talking about. This includes public housing authorities, owners of private multifamily housing, et cetera, really working with them to examine and revise their admission policies to reduce barriers for people with justice involvement. And now that we're seeing a real focus on this coming directly from HUD, that really helps set the tone for some great local collaborations to do this work.

Charles Francis:

And then the last point about partnership building is that even with this historic infusion of resources through ARP and the CARES Act, it's still not going to be enough to meet the housing needs for this population. And so, building these partnerships over time can also help you leverage additional funding sources beyond this pie to really be able to help make development projects feasible to meet rental assistance needs and so forth. Next slide, please.

Charles Francis:

So now I'm going to pass it over to Ann Miller to talk about how they have used CARES Act funding in Montana to develop permanent supportive housing for one tribal nation in particular. And CARES Act, just so you know, was sort of a precursor to ARP. It was really the first round of stimulus with some funds allocated for housing. So I'm excited to hear more about what Anne and her team have done.

Ann Miller:

Thank you, Charles. Next slide, please.

Ann Miller:

As Mr. Cho was speaking and also Charles, two things came to mind. One is partnerships. We found when we developed our program that partnerships was a key factor in planning our program and so far the success that we've enjoyed with our program. And also regarding the comments of reentering people and the challenges they face, we find that providing housing for people has established that need for stability, and stability really leads to success. We're finding that now with our Permanent Supportive Housing project. But I'll start with our story. Our project is called the Morningstar. It's a Permanent Supportive Housing project on the Flathead Reservation in Northwest Montana.

Ann Miller:

And really, our story starts about three years ago with a particular person at the Tribal Defender's Office, our Holistic Programming Director, Susette Billedeaux, who had the vision of permanent supportive housing for our most vulnerable people that we're serving on the reservation to provide homes for them and established stability. With the CARES Act funding, our tribal council decided to take an approach within the reservation to decide where money should best be spent and determine that the most vulnerable on our reservation to COVID were our homeless tribal members. So what they did was purchase an old motel on the reservation in Ronan, Montana, which is about six miles south of our tribal headquarters, refurbished that with CARES Act funds to 14 efficiency units to house 14 single adult tribal members. Next slide.

Ann Miller:

So with the efforts of the Homelessness Task Force that was established in response to the COVID pandemic, we really advocated for a permanent supportive housing model. And so, it was decided that the Morning Star, which is pictured here, would be a Permanent Supportive Housing project, which is a housing first model, trauma-

informed and harm-reduction model. So we were looking for a lead services provider to provide services to those housed at the Morning Star, and the Tribal Defender's Office decided to be that lead services provider. The reason we did that is that the Tribal Defender's Office has established a model of public defender services called Holistic Defense, which really addresses those issues that bring people into the criminal justice system and then all those collateral consequences that fall out when a person is charged with a crime or convicted of a crime. I can tell you that homelessness is both, and that's what contributes to the cycle. It's both a collateral consequence to being charged with a crime, and it's certainly an issue that drives people into the criminal justice system. So we stepped up to be the lead services provider. I think we can go to the next slide.

Ann Miller:

This is just a photo of one of the units, of course, before move in. So it was right after it was refurbished and we furnished the efficiency unit. As members of the Tribal Defender's interdisciplinary team, the Morning Star has at the location a caretaker who lives in an apartment at the Morning Star and also a services coordinator whose office is right at the Morning Star and provides case management services for the 14 individuals that live there. We try to pull in other services providers in the community including CSKT services providers, tribal health, for example, and they really became engaged pretty early on providing vaccines and healthcare checkups. We are engaging other services providers in the community. Our services coordinator is doing a lot of that programming and including cultural services to our clients at the Morning Star.

Ann Miller:

What we've done is prioritized tribal defender clients, most of whom are reentering individuals. Our housing authority is establishing the financial eligibility. We prioritize according to homelessness and risk of homelessness, and that's how we established our first 14 residents. We currently have a waiting list of people who are applying to get into our program.

Ann Miller:

So piloting our Permanent Supportive Housing project, really, we relied a lot on our housing authority director to walk us through the process of providing housing for people, how to screen people to get into the program, what financial qualification meant, and really just managing a program. The other partner in this that's really interesting is that we have a landlord who has been with us since the beginning and really adjusted her method of negotiating rule violations that is consistent with permanent supportive housing. So in other words, if there's a violation, it doesn't necessarily lead to eviction. What it leads to is negotiating with the resident to cure whatever the issue is so that we can maintain them in stable housing. We can go to the next photos. I think we have photos.

Ann Miller:

To the right is a photo of the services office. So this is the office that we established at the Morning Star that people who are coming to the facility to provide services can have an office to see people. And then on the left is the services coordinator office, certainly before he moved in. A comment about the case management that our services coordinator provides, he has a caseload basically of 14, the 14 residents at the Morning Star, but I can tell you that it's intensive case management, and it's intensive for a couple reasons. People that were housing at the Morning Star are really high needs because they are people that would otherwise not be housed somewhere else because they either couldn't get into public housing or they just couldn't sustain in public housing because of underlying issues that would make them unable to follow rules.

Ann Miller:

So, the work that he does with those individuals is intense. And it's also intense because his office is where people live. And so, he's really accessible to the people there, and that certainly is consistent with our model of holistic defense, which is being accessible to our clients and providing seamless access to services. And that certainly is the case at the Morning Star.

Ann Miller:

We're not even a year into the Morning Star from the first time we had people move in, we'll be a year in in June. And what we've learned over the process is that we've had to educate the community, the Department of Corrections, other agencies within the tribes, other service providers about the model of Permanent Supportive Housing. We've had to certainly advocate for that model and really be firm with the idea that it is housing-first, trauma-informed. We've developed rules for our staff and our residents. We've dealt with issues with our physical facility. We've really had to be clear about the lines of the Tribal Defender's Office being the services provider and our property manager being the landlord. We didn't want to blur those lines where the Tribal Defender's Office is considered the landlord. We are actually the entity that's negotiating when there's rule violations and really facilitating people's success in the Morning Star.

Ann Miller:

We have 14 people housed now, so the place is full. We have a waiting list of more than 50, so every time there's an opening, our team goes through the applications and prioritizes according to need and invites the next person to join the Morning Star. We are trying to establish a community there where the residents support each other, where it's safe, because many of our people coming out of incarceration or homelessness were experiencing certainly unsafe situations. We've learned that one of the most important aspects of permanent supportive housing is a safe environment for people.

Ann Miller:

More than half of our people are currently reentering from incarceration, and we define reentry as returning from anything from a federal facility to a state facility to

our local tribal jail or county jails. Some people will stay for years, and some people will transition to other housing. Some people will be able to move into other housing to reunite with their children or just reunite with family. What we've found overall is that it's really been our opportunity to see people be successful simply by providing a safe and stable place for people to land. That stability of housing has made a huge difference. The wraparound services there have made a huge difference so far. So far so good. We continue to learn lessons on how to do this and certainly want to learn from others that know more about permanent supportive housing and can help us out.

Ann Miller:

I'll hand this over to the program in Texas. Thank you.

Charles Francis:

Thank you so much, Ann. Great to hear about the amazing work that you all have done and especially driving home the point that housing is a place to be safe and a place to land and just how fundamental it is. It's great to see HUD using these federal resources to meet those needs in a way that is customized and tailored to your community.

Charles Francis:

So now we're going to move across the country to Austin and Travis County, Texas. Very excited to hear, as Richard noted earlier, Secretary Fudge has placed a particular priority on prioritizing people in reentry for HUD's Emergency Housing Vouchers. Well, Austin and Travis County were one of the first communities that answered that call, and like I said before, it's really because of the strength and depth of their cross-system partnerships, as I think you'll see from our panel today. So I'm going to hand it over to Dylan Shubitza to get us started.

Dylan Shubitza:

Hey, thanks, Charlie. Actually, Victoria's going to get us kicked off on the next slide.

Victoria Perez:

Hello, everyone. Yeah, so... The next slide, please. So, our history of the partnership and collaboration started last fall in 2021. And so, the current housing authorities here in Austin would be the Housing Authority for the City of Austin, Travis County, and then the Coordinated Entry System with ECHO and then the Continuum of Homeless Service Providers. And so, we started working closely with the Mental Health Public Defender's Office last fall in 2021. We initially met each week to start off conversations and getting engaged with one another and working through communication with the Travis County commissioner. We began discussing capacity concerns and housing MHPD as a new resource.

Victoria Perez:

Our board of directors and the Travis County, we support and encourage working with vulnerable populations, and we add them as our top priority in working with them. We have landlords incentives also for new landlords that are renting to this population. So far we've leased four of them as of today in April 20th, and we still have applicant searching. We have 24 that we issued with MHPD, and then we had 10 vouchers that we were issuing with Integral Care, which is another resource in Austin that assists with case management and ongoing assistance with searching for housing. We're still trying to work through a lot of the barriers that they're coming across, which is across the board with them not having any income and their backgrounds. However, with the incentives that we're able to provide and each client is awarded their funds, we're able to assist with security deposits and application fees. And then we also give MHPD a certain amount... replenish their funds as needed to assist with those funds for each client.

Victoria Perez:

Austin housing market is very, very, very tough, so we're still trying to work around certain landlords and get into good relationships and partnerships with them with our clients knowing that they have their certain barriers and challenges to lease them up. So, yeah, so pretty much we are just following the guidance and requirements and we've implemented the policies to our program. Yeah, we're very excited. It's an amazing program and opportunity to house each client. Next slide.

Melissa Shearer:

Hi, I'm Melissa Shearer, and I'm the Director for the Mental Health Public Defender, which Victoria just mentioned our partnership. Our office represents people in criminal cases that have a serious mental health diagnosis and the absolute least resources. So most of our folks don't have any income at all. Some of them have Social Security benefits, but for the most part, we're representing the most vulnerable folks that are highly symptomatic with their mental health, not at all times, but in cyclical periods. As mental health diagnoses go, it generally comes in cycles, and sometimes people will do well for a long time and then things happen. They stop taking their meds or their meds stop working, other stressors come up, new symptoms come up, and then they destabilize. What happens very frequently is that they end up being arrested because of their symptom presentation in the community.

Melissa Shearer:

When we first started out a few years ago, back in 2017, we got access to the Homeless Management Information System in Travis County so that we could be sure that our client's information was in there because we were struggling to get people housed. Our office was and still does use temporary emergency shelter that we fund with the intent that while we're funding those beds, they'll be working towards getting ready for housing, getting all the documents they need, getting stabilized, and with the intention that after a few months they would be ready for housing and there would be a permanent supportive housing spot ready for them. But we quickly learned that that was not happening. Our clients who scored high enough on the

coordinated assessment for permanent supportive housing were on list for years, and their names never came up, because we don't have that big of a quantity of it in our community to meet the need.

Melissa Shearer:

We did get people trained in our office to start doing those coordinated entry assessments ourselves because some of the issues that we noticed were that people were not answering the questions for the assessment in ways that were accurate and really demonstrated their need. And so, whereas, we have worked with clients for years and we knew their histories, we knew the background, then we could help provide some additional information that might get them a few more points. Because we would have folks say if we asked the question, "Do you have any current legal issues?" and they might answer no. But they do have current legal issues because they're being represented by us in a criminal case. And so, some of that was not understanding the questions or being embarrassed about providing an answer like that. And so, we found that it helped when we started doing the coordinated assessments ourselves.

Melissa Shearer:

In addition to that, we would be connected to the local mental health authority and trying to get folks into vouchers, permanent supportive housing, through the local mental health authority. The same situation was really happening because we're there waiting years and their names never come up on the list. And so, that's kind of where we were. We were stuck, and we were having to ask for more and more funds for longer term emergency shelter beds because their names weren't coming up as quickly as we had hoped because in our opinion, they are very vulnerable. They met the criteria and really should be housed, but the need is too great and our supply was too little. So that's basically what we had before we started the vouchers.

Melissa Shearer:

Our social workers and case workers were already doing intensive case management with clients. They would work with the attorneys to mitigate any potential collateral consequences in a case, try to help get dismissal so that criminal histories won't continue to be an issue for getting housed, would help to avoid sex offender registrations for people whose mental health presentation was the reason for this arrest, so that they wouldn't be barred from housing for those things. And they spent a lot of time working on getting their basic needs met, getting their health needs met, but housing was still completely out of reach for a lot of folks. So I will pass it on for the Downtown Austin Community Courts program.

Jennifer Sowinski:

Thank you, Melissa. So, Downtown Austin Community Court is the Class C misdemeanor court where it's a restorative court. So, we're looking at alternative sentencing for individuals, particularly individuals experiencing homelessness. We really focus on serving individuals that have been homeless for many years, that have

co-occurring mental health, medical, substance use issues, and almost all have a higher level charge than a Class C misdemeanor.

Jennifer Sowinski:

We have nine intensive case managers that have a caseload of 15. Similar to what Anne was talking about, our clients need a lot of support. We are taking on clients that have a lot of needs, so caseloads are small. And then we have approximately 300 people on a waitlist that have asked for our services. So prior to receiving these vouchers, we do contracts. We do have 52 units, PSH units, that have been full for a while now. That leaves over about 400 people on our waitlist and caseloads that we're trying to find the housing.

Jennifer Sowinski:

So, as far as outreach and engagement, we have a 12-step outreach program that we use, each case manager when we accept a referral. And then they also have one of our clinical case managers on our Homeless Outreach Street Team, which is a multidisciplinary outreach team that is out in the community. So they're helping us as far as outreach as well. And then we also have the assessment. You can't even get into the system unless you complete this coordinated assessment, and sometimes it's very difficult to access. So we do have an assessor that comes every Wednesday and completes regulated assessments.

Jennifer Sowinski:

One other thing that was brought up earlier is the collaboration piece. That is huge and so important when we're working with our clients. For instance, we work regularly with Melissa's team, the Mental Health Public Defender case managers, because it's not uncommon that we'll see one of the individuals that we're trying to outreach and case manage is in jail, we have a higher level charge. So we'll reach out to her team and say, "Okay, let's work together on the release plan for this client. It's not uncommon that we'll have a client that even if we do not have immediate housing afterwards, we will offer that client a... We have a dual diagnosis contract for substance use and mental health that's is not inpatient, but you stay there, so it's a residential program, so that we can help that client stabilize outside of jail, access services while we are working on that housing need.

Jennifer Sowinski:

Any contract we have, whether it's our Mental Health Public Authority, housing contractors, we meet with them and staff clients weekly, biweekly, monthly, because it's really important that we all collaborate. Because particularly by the time somebody gets into jail, they've touched a lot of systems, so I always look at these clients are everyone's clients. We can work on this piece because we have access to these vouchers, but we need help with these other pieces, so we have to reach out and provide.

Jennifer Sowinski:

And as far as ESG recipient, so we have the staffing and Austin Public Health reached out to us when they received the funding and asked us to start another program. It's a rapid re-housing program. So we put a proposal together and sent it in, and we added five critical case managers and a supervisor that only worked with ESG that had ARPA funding, but it's still through the CoC referrals through the coordinated assessment system.

Jennifer Sowinski:

I do want to point out, we have a team of 20 on our team, and that's including me. We have a team of 20 and we're all mastering level clinicians. We think that's really important because the clients that we are trying to serve are some of the most acute, and it takes a lot of clinical skills to really a lot of times successfully work with clients and work on all their needs. That is another feature [inaudible 00:49:18]. Moving on to probably the next slide.

Dylan Shubitz:

Right. Thanks, Jennifer. So yeah, you've heard about our system, the players within it, and yeah, it's really amazing how well everything really fell into place to create permanent supportive housing with the Emergency Housing Voucher program. When we got these vouchers, a total of 276 across both housing authorities, we set to work with the CoC, an organization called ECHO, and had to determine what we were going to do with these vouchers. So we started a whole community-wide stakeholder engagement process. We published a survey, sent it out far and wide, and got a pretty incredible response. The responses we got back basically told us loud and clear without any hesitation, I mean, it was very clear that the community wanted it to create permanent supportive housing as best we could with this resource. Next slide, please.

Dylan Shubitz:

So the nuts and bolts there is the housing authorities and the CoC lead, ECHO, enter into an MOU. ECHO's role in that partnership is to help identify service providers to provide the supportive services to pair up with these subsidies to create that full Permanent Supportive Housing model and create a permanent supportive housing bed. And then from ECHO, ECHO creates an MOU with the service provider. The service provider agrees to assist clients through the coordinated entry system and basically enroll and assist and provide services and house the next most vulnerable person according to the new Austin Prioritization Index, which is also very cool. If you all have the time and interest, check into that. Next slide, please.

Dylan Shubitz:

So yeah, with this mandate to create new permanent supportive housing and with Secretary Fudge's guidance and other guidance from usage and the National Alliance to End Homelessness, we heard pretty loud and clear, and not to mention the local standards that we have and the strategic direction of the CoC board, which I'm a part of, and the new Homeless Strategy Division within the City of Austin, yeah, we knew

we needed to create not just any PSH but the most high fidelity PSH that we possibly could. We were able to do that by eliminating all the traditional barriers to entry.

Dylan Shubitz:

Well, part of what Dr. Cho mentioned before was the discretion locally that public housing authorities and other players in the housing industry have to set policies and erect barriers to admission to those programs. The EHV program was really cool in that there was additional flexibility in implementation of local policies, and with another engagement process with our stakeholders, which included people with lived experience in homelessness and the criminal justice system, providers in homelessness and the criminal justice system, it was basically unanimous, everyone said, "Reduce the barriers as much as possible. Implement all of the flexibility you can." That included not implementing any additional screening for criminal history for entry to the program, relaxed documentation requirements, maximizing the value of each individual voucher. And yeah, that's where we went. We leveraged all that flexibility as best we could, to the maximum extent possible.

Dylan Shubitz:

And so then it was time to identify who are those service providers going to be. And as you heard, MHPD had some talks within county government, with the housing authority, and the Board of Commissioners in addition to the CoC lead, ECHO, to, yeah, bring this brand new partnership into being to create permanent supportive housing. This is not something that MHPD had done at this level to this depth of involvement. They're a little bit more next about the implementation of that.

Dylan Shubitz:

And then Downtown Austin Community Court just stepped up and said, "Hey, we've got all these case... clinicians rather, working on our Intensive Case Management program. We will dedicate 60 slots to create 60 new PSH beds." So with 276 vouchers across the CoC we are able to create 84 PSH beds that were being targeted to the reentry population and people specifically with criminal justice involvement. And that's how it happened. Next slide, and I'll take it back to Jennifer and Melissa.

Jennifer Sowinski:

I can-

Melissa Shearer:

Okay.

Jennifer Sowinski:

So I could start?

Melissa Shearer:

Do you want to go first?

Jennifer Sowinski:

Sure. So as far as staffing, like Darren said and I mentioned earlier, we've had the infrastructure, we had the staffing, and we have two rapid re-housing programs, so we already had policies, we had the HUD criteria, so it was pretty easy to tweak our policies and procedures to be able to meet the requirements of these vouchers.

Jennifer Sowinski:

Our role as far as more housing focused, our goal has always been with a client. Our end goal has always been to stably house that individual, because as Richard said earlier, all the data shows that once somebody is housed, they're not re-offending, they're not using the crisis systems out there. So that has always been our end goal, and the opportunity to create much needed PSH, that was it. I mean, we have 135 individuals on our caseloads and another over 300 on a waitlist, so we also had the clients asking for the help, but we didn't have the vouchers to be able to actually house these individuals. So we were having to try to help that client increase their income, look at alternative housing like boarding homes or some sort of shared housing agreements. And most of our clients really don't have the capacity to work. Most of them we are working for disability benefits, which can take a year or longer to actually retain. So these are much needed vouchers. To Melissa.

Melissa Shearer:

So unlike Downtown Austin Community Court, we did not have any policies and procedures yet about permanent supportive housing. We were starting from scratch, but there were so many resources out there. There was SAHMSA's guide on best practices for permanent supportive housing. We had great help from the other community members that were doing this work. We had weekly meetings with ECHO and with the Housing Authority of Travis County, to which we were able to learn the processes and develop our own internal methods and how we were going to do this. In addition, in preparing to implement this, we hired a temporary social services assistant who did a lot of outreach in the community to try and find apartment units that would take the vouchers, to just really start opening that up and getting our folks a list of where they could even start with it.

Melissa Shearer:

What we did have already was a lot of long-term relationships with clients that have been unhoused. Because how our office works is that whenever a client is re-arrested, we get appointed to that client again. So they've got the same social worker, the same lawyer for some periods of time, that those relationships can develop and we can more easily assess who's ready for housing. Because not everyone is ready to go from homelessness into an apartment. I mean, it is a huge benefit to people, but not everyone is necessarily ready for that. We can't just put everyone into a voucher, especially because a lot of our clients are very, very ill. And even with the permanent supportive housing case workers, probably need more assistance than that. So, some of them we've had to work on other supports in addition to what we can do.

Melissa Shearer:

But it's still an evolving process, but we've got it all written down, how we're going to do each step, and it's been just super helpful to be part of the local collaboration where we're in meetings with other people that are providing permanent supportive housing and hearing issues that they've had and learning how they resolved them and being able to ask those questions. So really in preparing, it was a lot of talking to people and developing our own spin on things.

Melissa Shearer:

Do we have another slide?

Speaker X:

Actually...

Melissa Shearer:

Okay, key implementation issues. Okay, so major issues that we had, which have already been talked about, is that we have a really high needs population. We're working with people that are in reentry processes, but they also experience significant mental health challenges and frequently mental health challenges and substance use challenges, which can make going through these processes harder and not so linear to get things done. You have some starts and stops in terms of getting the steps needed that you need to get done.

Melissa Shearer:

We've had folks that we will be ready to take to see an apartment and fill out the application, but that day they're presenting really symptomatic. You can see the landlord looking like, "Yeah, this one's not going to make it." So those kinds of things have been issues. It is a really tight rental market. People are in Austin paying more, offering more than what the rental has been advertised as. So if it's advertised as \$1,500 for this apartment, there are people in Austin that will say, "Well, I'll pay 1,700," and they don't have a criminal history. So we're competing against people with more money, more stability, and less of the built-in stigma.

Melissa Shearer:

And then the strategies to increase success, of course, we do a lot of landlord outreach. I mentioned we hired a temp for a couple of months that worked to do that with us. We're constantly just sharing information. I saw that this place takes our vouchers and they are okay with this amount of criminal history. And as soon as we hear that, and then we're like, "Okay, I've got somebody, let's go over there." Another implementation issue was our clients generally do not have any income whatsoever, but it costs money to apply for these apartments. And so, at the beginning we were paying out of pocket, case workers paying out of pocket and getting reimbursed for application fees because we didn't have any funds that we could use to do this. We didn't have any access to that, but we were able to work with Housing Authority of Travis County, and they were able to get us a certain

amount of money in cash that we build from and go and do these applications because our clients were at the mercy of, "Can someone come up with \$50 to pay for this application fee?"

Melissa Shearer:

And so that fund has fixed that problem completely. Which it's just been little things that we hadn't considered. We hadn't considered that there would be apartment complexes that wouldn't say, "Yes, we see you have a voucher, and we will wait for the application fee until the housing authorities timeframe for getting a check to us." With that tight rental market, they're like, "Whoever's got the application fee and the application and everything done, they're going to get it. We're not waiting for funds when we don't have to."

Melissa Shearer:

But I think those were the biggest reentry issues. They continued to be one individual, the first person that we had housed, had only one thing on her history, and it was a dismissed misdemeanor assault, but she was denied at several apartment complexes because of that. So, there's so much that's... It's just very subjective out there and some folks will take you some folks won't. Some folks will take you with a 20-page criminal history, some folks won't take you with one dismissed charge. So it is a lot of work.

Melissa Shearer:

Another implementation issue just was our clients are used to getting the runaround and they're used to being denied, and that's traumatic to continue to do that over and over again. And so, sometimes you get to the point where clients are just like, "Okay, just forget it. I quit." And really trying to work with that has been another issue that we've been working through. Jennifer?

Jennifer Sowinski:

Okay. So for community court, there was an incentive that if you housed individuals, I think it was October, November, December, there was also some funding that went back to the community. So with our case managers and with all these clients we have on caseload and our waitlist, we thought, "No problem. We'll get people in by December." Well, that didn't work because the housing market. But we really tried to be very strategic with these vouchers. And so, we would ask the CoC to send us the next 100 people that are on the list that fit our criteria. We would look through that, and if it's somebody who comes in a lot, if it's someone we know how to reach very quickly, we work with outreach teams in the community, "Hey, out of these funded individuals, who do you see on a regular basis?" So that we try to get people in quickly, those people that we really maybe can engage and outreach teams could provide a warm handoff to us so we can continue that engagement.

Jennifer Sowinski:

So we really tried to be very strategic that way. We also have what is called... We call them our walk-in services. We have two clinical case managers that are available

Monday through Friday, 8:00 to 5:00, and individuals can just walk in. They do not need an appointment, they're seen first come first served, and we will work with them on getting their IDs, basically anything they need that we can do in a half an hour period. It's a light touch. That was very helpful for individuals with these vouchers. As you know, a lot of our clients that we work with show up at nine o'clock on Monday, they just don't have the capacity to do that.

Jennifer Sowinski:

So within our walk-in system, we are able to really move forward with this client's voucher because every time they came in, we can say, "Okay..." Because we have pretty precise notes that you always know what the next step is that needs to happen when the client comes in. So we really use that service that they come in, we'd say, "Okay, you need to sign X, Y, and Z, or we need to get you so and so to a certain place to pick something up." Whatever that need was, those walk-in services really, really helped.

Jennifer Sowinski:

As far as placement, as Melissa mentioned, in the Austin housing market, that's what's been most challenging and has kept us from already housing 60 individuals. There's just a lack of units. There is no incentive for properties to accept someone with a criminal history versus the other person that walks in, offers more money, and has no criminal history. So it's an extremely competitive market.

Jennifer Sowinski:

As far as strategies, so we have a housing list that we use that all of the case managers keep up on because this is how competitive it is, they'll see that a part of the complex is being built, they will call that complex before its finished and say, "When can we start applying?" And if they get an "Absolute, no, we won't take your client," we let everybody know so we don't waste our time really pursuing that. But there's others who say, "Yeah, we'll take a voucher." And so, we let everybody know on our team's chat that several people who have clients that are waiting for that have these vouchers will try to apply. So it's that competitive.

Jennifer Sowinski:

We also feel a denial if we feel that it is really unjust, similarly to what Melissa just... the example she gave. We would've appealed that because that just does not seem like it's fair. When we apply, we often attach a support letter on our court letterhead outlining what support services that are attached to the voucher and the clients so that there may be more compassion to house that individual knowing that they have supportive services that are going to be attached to that. We've tried landlord incentives. And then the flexible funding, like Melissa said, I think there's a \$300 application fee for these vouchers. You can go through that really quickly. It's not unusual for clients that have a fairly recent criminal history of any type of violence that we like... We have one client that was contacted over 60 different apartment complex and applied to a handful of those. So well way over that \$300, so you have to have that flexible funding.

Jennifer Sowinski:

And also, when the client moves in, they're not going to stay in an empty apartment. We have some funding for some furniture, for some basic needs so they can cook and clean or they're just not worth stay there. We really work on developing those relationships with property managers. We make sure to stop in, "Hey, how are things doing?" And the more likely they'll assist us with other vouchers we have. Oh, this is the last thing. All of our case managers have a City of Austin credit card, and this really has been very valuable in this housing market. Because when you go to apply, if you wait three days for that check to be cut, because that's how long it takes that City of Austin check to be cut and we get it in our hands, that unit's long gone. We need to be able to pay for that application fee and get that application in that day. So those credit cards have been very valuable in that. That's all.

Charles Francis:

Thank you so much, Jennifer. Thank you so much for the whole Austin team for sharing about the amazing work you're doing. It's not easy, requires a lot of work, a lot of coordination, and a lot of time, but it's really inspiring. Thank you to all of our presenters today, to the Austin team, to Ann, to Richard. I think we could probably do this for another three hours, but hopefully some of you have gotten your questions answered in the chat and in the Q&A. I will share my email address as well too if anybody has any further questions and if any other panelists want to do the same in the chat, can definitely do that as well.

Charles Francis:

Just before we wrap up, we're going to share in the chat a couple of resources. As part of HUD's increasing focus on this area, they've launched a new technical assistance page on the HUD Exchange focusing on resources, starting with two of our resources on preventing homelessness among people leaving prisons and jails. Sort of a broad level overview of all the different policy levels on the state level, as well as a specific article about building partnerships between continuance of care and the correction system.

Charles Francis:

And if you're interested in that topic, we will particularly encourage you to sign up for our next Second Chance Housing webinar, which is going to be next week, April 27th at 3:00 PM Eastern. Thank you all so much for joining us today, and we hope you have a wonderful rest of the day.