



Innovation Number 15

Creating Housing, Closing Shelters, Ending Homelessness: Transforming policy and practice in one community agency in Massachusetts

- South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) commits to a conversion strategy for its agency mission and resources with a goal of closing its emergency shelters in two years and transforming its agency-wide policy and practice to housing- focused solutions
- Top-to-bottom reexamination of resources and results impacts points of entry, operating philosophy, data collection, and housing and employment goals

WHAT IS THE INNOVATION AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

In June 2006, the South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) publicly announced a fundamental change in the agency's mission for people who experience homelessness: SMOC would phase out its emergency shelters over two years and shift its resources and focus to permanent supportive housing. SMOC's conversion strategy was laid out in its new plan, *Ending Homelessness for Single Adults in the MetroWest Region of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, which called for a transformation in agency policy and practice, with a Board and staff commitment to place individuals experiencing homelessness in permanent housing, not shelter.

The planned transformation included addressing the history at the heart of SMOC's initiatives: as an agency, SMOC embraced sobriety and abstinence from drugs and alcohol. In addition, the vast network of SMOC's own resources as a Community Action Program had evolved over time with multiple points of entry and gaps in internal integration.

Each phase of the planned conversion was to be marked with the closing of a shelter or the conversion of shelter to supported housing. Phase One would launch a new service delivery system and the conversion from a shelter-to-housing approach for shelter "graduates" to a housing-focused model of homeless prevention, triage, and rapid re-housing. At the heart of the new system is the Common Ground Resource Center which opened as the Common Ground Shelter, a facility of last resort for many, was closed. Now serving as the hub for the housing network in the MetroWest region, the Resource Center is staffed by an interdisciplinary team of resource providers with an integrated use of data and technology to facilitate client flow and outcome monitoring.

From services and support at the new resource center funded by MetroWest Community Healthcare Foundation (providing intake, screening assessment, homeless diversion stabilization, and services by professional staff with expertise in case management, employment, housing placement, behavioral health, and primary care), some people avoid homelessness altogether or receive assistance to return to their "home community." Others receive an immediate referral for detoxification services or medical or psychiatric hospitalization. Still others, depending on history, income, addiction, mental health and other variables, may be able to go directly into a sober, affordable, or transitional residential program. Those who are not immediately placed may become guests in a 20-bed, 10-day emergency placement facility for further assessment and determination of needs.

Additional housing options and resources, coupled with access to treatment and an economic development plan that puts people to work immediately are the other critical elements for rapid re-housing. Integrated throughout the model is a system of evaluation and an integration of evidence-based practices, with outcomes measured at various points in the system.

Key to the transformation plan was the specific outlining of resources and policy and contract changes needed to support the conversion. The details included: pilot prevention funding, amendments to existing public contracts to support the conversion strategy, strategies for housing and service integration, expansion of treatment options and resources for specific populations (such as youth), and new partnership initiatives with business and civic leaders.