

JG RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

# Reaching Home Evaluation

Quick Look

**February 2023**

## Introduction

In 2012, in response to federal level efforts by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to address houselessness more strategically, the City of Missoula and Missoula County adopted *Reaching Home: Missoula's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness (Reaching Home)*. The plan aimed to provide a common vision and ideas to move from “managing homelessness to ending it.” *Reaching Home* is both a plan and a program focused on strengthening Missoula’s system of services for those experiencing houselessness and at risk of losing housing. At the end of the plan’s ten-year timeframe, the City of Missoula wanted to understand the range of progress, successes, and gaps related to *Reaching Home*. In the Spring of 2022, JG Research & Evaluation was contracted by the City of Missoula to conduct an evaluation of the last ten years of work related to *Reaching Home*. The evaluation was finished during the period of June 2022 – January 2023.

*The Reaching Home* plan was built around four building blocks or themes: 1) Implementation of the 10-year plan (putting the plan into action), 2) Service collaboration and coordination (services working together), 3) Houseless prevention and rapid re-housing, and 4) Continuum (range) of housing options. These building blocks have guided the work of the City of Missoula and its partners over the last ten years and were used in this evaluation to understand the progress made and areas for continued improvement in *Reaching Home*.

## Evaluation background

The evaluation study was guided by the following key questions: a) How well was *Reaching Home* put into action across time and across organizations and partners; b) what factors helped or got in the way of putting the plan into action, c) what gaps remain in housing options available in Missoula; and d) what are the experiences of individuals who have been or are currently unhoused or at risk of losing housing related to *Reaching Home* activities?

To answer the key evaluation questions, the evaluation team used many methods to gather information and carefully study it. Sources of information included interviews with individuals who have experience being unhoused (N=23), interviews with individuals working to serve those experiencing houselessness (i.e., city and partner agency staff (N=29), a partner agency staff survey (N=39) and focus group (N=8)), a community-based survey (N=601) and two focus groups with community members (N=18). Lastly, client-level data collected through the Missoula Coordinated Entry System (MCES, N= 3308) was used to look into how individuals used services over time and whether they became housed or not.

## Key findings

From 2012 to 2022, *Reaching Home* set a common vision and developed a system for organizations to work well together with the goal of understanding houselessness in Missoula and providing services for the individuals experiencing houselessness in the community, identify gaps in the system, and grow services toward making housing easy to get and use for each person who calls Missoula home. The city’s leadership, the Missoula Coordinated Entry System, Operation Safe Shelter, and the efforts of direct service providers happening today show the gains made over the last ten years and the expected successes in the future.

## Reaching Home's progress

- Set a common vision and dedicated program staff within the City of Missoula's Community Development Division.
- Created a simpler way to access services and resources by introducing the "no wrong door" philosophy across the city through the Missoula Coordinated Entry System, which is important in gathering measurable results and connecting people experiencing houselessness with the best available resources.
- Supported and started creative programs to improve first responder interactions, add shelter options, and provide behavioral health resources.

## The Implementation of the 10-Year Plan

*I have no doubt that we would be in a dire situation without the infrastructure that we built through the 10-year plan, including the Missoula coordinated entry system. I think that in and of itself, the creation of the coordinated entry system, was a huge outcome that never would've happened without the collaborative work around the 10-year plan, the commitment that we had from the nonprofit sector, and those service providers in the 10-year plan. –Key informant*

*Reaching Home* was first managed by the United Way of Missoula County and later moved to be under the City of Missoula's management in 2016. Since then, the City of Missoula has continued to grow the *Reaching Home* program. The changes that have happened while putting *Reaching Home* into action over the last ten years show the program's flexibility in finding ways to reach its goals and the complex nature of housing. *Reaching Home* began with a clear goal to "end homelessness" that, while proving unrealistic, set a long-lasting vision to make real change. Focusing on housing first, houselessness prevention, and rapid re-housing clearly set the goal of sheltering individuals, either experiencing houselessness or at risk of houselessness, as a key priority of the City of Missoula and partner agencies.

Some of the key reasons that made putting *Reaching Home* into action possible were partnerships and input from many different types of organizations and people, support from city leadership, and key funding resources. Some of the more challenging parts of putting the plan into action were building trust and approval from direct services providers, a lack of reliable, long-term funding sources, and the limited staff and resources among partner agencies and social service providers.

One of the most common concerns with putting *Reaching Home* into action was the communication and messaging around it. Individuals across participant groups, including partner agencies and community members, regularly shared frustration that the City of Missoula and its partners have not communicated their efforts well around *Reaching Home*, including the progress made and the areas for continued improvement. Moving forward, many voiced that they wanted to see more clear, honest, and easy to find and understand information about efforts to address houselessness in Missoula.

## Service collaboration and coordination

An important part of what made putting *Reaching Home* into action possible was bringing partner agencies together to create a consistent, centrally managed system of services to address houselessness, which can be seen in the management of the program moving to the City of Missoula and the creation of Missoula

Coordinated Entry System. Managing *Reaching Home* within the city shows a change in the number of resources and attention focused on addressing houselessness at a citywide level. In addition to growing the number of staff dedicated to putting Reaching Home into action, in the last couple years the city and its partners have started many new programs aimed at helping first responders and partner agencies work together to better their responses to the challenging situations that come up in the lives of individuals experiencing houselessness.

### **Reaching Home teaming up with partner agencies and Missoula's first responders**

- The Mobile Support Team, hosted by Missoula Fire Department
- Frequent Users of Systems Engagement (FUSE) program, created by Partnership Health Center in partnership with the City
- Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), hosted at the Poverello Center with support from the City
- Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), hosted by the Missoula Police Department

According to the people who participated in the study, one of *Reaching Home's* greatest successes and most valuable additions to the city's ability to support those experiencing houselessness was the development of the Missoula Coordinated Entry System (MCES), initially started in 2017. MCES aims to prioritize limited housing resources, prevent households from entering the houselessness system, make sure that organizations are not providing the same services, and provide data to improve outcomes for those experiencing houselessness. Long before Reaching Home, partner agencies were on the ground, providing services to those experiencing houselessness in the Missoula community, but as many of those who participated in the study noted, agencies often did not communicate or cooperate with one another and often faced challenges related to their ability to provide services, like not enough staff or money. MCES was the first complete and thorough effort to coordinate Missoula's services and resources. By providing a single point of entry, MCES can identify and follow each person as they work through the range of houselessness and housing services in Missoula, which helps to make sure that individuals are connected with resources quickly and fairly.

#### **The Growing Reach of MCES Data**

*As the data gathered grows and data quality gets better across the system, tracking MCES data such as "exit destinations" provides understanding of the types of housing most available to people experiencing houselessness and the system's ability to permanently house people.*

*It has taken many years to fully put MCES into action, but its ability to provide accurate and effective data that describes who is experiencing houselessness in Missoula and how the community can best serve them continues to grow. While participating in MCES is something providers can choose to do, being part of the system does require partner agencies to commit to certain policies and procedures and a level of communication and engagement beyond their typical operation of services. As a result, reaching full and consistent participation in MCES from partner agencies was a challenge when MCES was first started and continues to be hard today.*

### **Houselessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing**

One of the key guiding ideas behind *Reaching Home* was the prevention of houselessness and rapid re-housing, or shelter services, for those experiencing houselessness. In many ways, the City of Missoula and partner agencies have successfully developed rapid shelter programs and services over the last ten years but

prevention services for those at risk of losing housing and services to help those who are successfully housed to keep their housing, remain areas for continued growth and improvement. Included in the continued need for prevention services is the need for more behavioral health services, such as substance use or mental health treatment, to support individuals in managing their behavioral health conditions.

### **“Operation Safe Shelter”:** Reaching Home’s creative shelter options

*Operation Safe Shelter was a program started by the City of Missoula, Missoula County and their partners to creatively respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on houselessness and the gaps that already existed before the plan in the types of shelter spaces available to effectively shelter individuals experiencing houselessness in Missoula. While it would be hard to overstate the effects of the pandemic on houselessness and its many causes, the increase in COVID-19 related funding sources from the federal government and a growing number of individuals experiencing houselessness led to several new shelter options in Missoula, each with their own successes and challenges.*

### **The Emergency Winter Shelter (EWS) at Johnson Street:**

- Low barrier option offering basic services and a place to sleep for hundreds of individuals who are unhoused during harsh winter months.
- While there were past versions of the EWS, the Johnson Street shelter represents a more formal shelter option that is regularly planned for and fully staffed day and night during the winter season.
- Law enforcement feedback on EWS: *“I think that it is managed well. It operates very smoothly in the last couple of years that I’ve been around. It provided a great service. Quite frankly, I couldn’t imagine what Missoula would be like in the winter without it.”*

### **The Temporary Safe Outdoor Space (TSOS)**

- High barrier option offering prefabricated individual shelter units and support services to 35-40 residents (the first version of the program served 25-30 residents).
- Participants described TSOS as a shelter option that “works.”
- Partner Agency feedback on TSOS: *“Almost half the people who’ve gone through [TSOS] have been housed. That’s pretty impressive. It shows what a relationship-based, service rich environment can do.”*

### **The Authorized Campsite (ACS)**

- Low barrier option that offered 40 campsites and some basic services to residents.
- Closed due to challenges related to the ability to manage it, the planning required to move staff and supplies to where they were needed, lack of funding, and public health and safety concerns.
- Partner agency and city staff feedback was often critical of ACS, while the feedback from former residents was more positive, suggesting that there is a need for this type of shelter option, but it may require a greater commitment of resources.

*Lived Expert feedback on ACS: “[ACS] has given us the first stable foundation block that we had. Just that first building block for us to be able to take the next steps in positive change towards the fight to get our lives running.” agencies work together to better their responses to the challenging situations that come up in the lives of individuals experiencing houselessness.”*

The successes and challenges of the Operation Safe Shelter programs show the complex nature of meeting the basic needs of Missoulians experiencing houselessness while showing *Reaching Home's* flexibility and commitment to effective change.

## Continuum of Housing Options

One of the four building blocks outlined in the original *Reaching Home* plan is a continuum, or range, of housing options to meet the wide variety of needs of those experiencing houselessness and housing insecurity, which has proven to be one of the hardest goals to meet. Growing existing and building new housing options across the continuum demands a lot of money, time, and political interest. While the city and its partners have grown the number of resources to support a strong and healthy continuum of housing options, real gaps remain.

### **The main gaps in housing options highlighted by participants**

- A variety of emergency housing options, especially for specific vulnerable subpopulations such as the elderly, those with serious medical and behavioral health conditions, and women.
- Transitional housing options for individuals working to secure permanent housing options.
- More permanent supportive housing options for individuals who require consistent support to maintain their housing.
- More housing that is affordable and accessible to low-income households.

## Impact on outcomes for individuals

Data collected throughout *Reaching Home* have some big limits in the ability to provide a complete and thorough picture or understanding of the outcomes among individuals who enter the coordinated entry system. Even so, through efforts to improve data quality and completeness and by supporting broad use of the system among partners, beginning and building on MCES has had a positive impact on being able to understand and put numbers to client outcomes. Clients are spending less time in MCES (e.g., on average 205 days in 2019 to 157 days in 2021), and the rate of multiple entries (individuals entering the system more than once) has been decreasing since 2019. Since the start of MCES, 15% of MCES clients have more than one entry into the system.

When someone exits MCES, their destination is often not tracked (63%), however 23% of all known destinations were to permanent housing (e.g., rental by client with ongoing housing payment support) and 9% of known destinations were to non-permanent or temporary housing (e.g., moving in with friends or family). One of the major challenges to understanding MCES data is unknown or missing information about the reasons why people leave the system. In 2020, the data collection policies and procedure that guide MCES were changed, and it will take time to fully understand the impact of these changes.

## Future Considerations

Even though *Reaching Home* set a clear and common goal for the City of Missoula and partner agencies to work together to address houselessness, the gaps in prevention services and the range of housing options show the complicated challenges in the effort to end houselessness. From the beginning, *Reaching Home* has been centered on the real experiences of Missoulians who know what it is like to be unhoused, but the growing needs of people within the community, especially in the big picture of COVID-19 and a lack of

affordable houses, continue to be greater than efforts to house them. The *Reaching Home* plan included houseless prevention services and treatment services for substance use and mental health disorders as key ways to address houselessness, but the need for improving access to these types of services remains needed and important today.

*Reaching Home* did not end the experience of houselessness in Missoula, but it did make the connections needed to bring organizations together to better understand houselessness while supporting and measuring creative efforts to make real improvements for those experiencing houselessness. As the City of Missoula and its partners think about next steps in preventing and addressing houselessness in an organized and unified way, the foundation that has been laid over the last ten years should guide their efforts. Priority should be placed on supporting the long-term success of existing programs while creating new programs that fill the key gaps outlined by study participants. The city and partners should also invest in ways to easily communicate and connect with the Missoula community around their efforts to provide resources to those who are experiencing housing insecurity or houselessness.

As a result of *Reaching Home*, in looking at Missoula's system of services to address houselessness, the challenges are clearer, the efforts more unified, and the opportunities more varied and easily accessed today than they were ten years ago.