

**To:** 2023-24 Marin County Civil Grand Jury

**From:** The Older Adults Committee of the Marin County Homeless Policy Steering Committee

**Re:** Civil Grand Jury Report: "Older Adults on the Brink of Homelessness: Time to Act is Now," dated June 21, 2024

**Date:** August 7, 2024

Thank you for inviting the Homeless Policy Steering Committee's (HPSC's) Older Adult Committee (OAC) to respond to the Marin County Civil Grand Jury report titled "Older Adults on the Brink of Homelessness: Time to Act is Now." This timely and important document highlights the crisis of homelessness that older adults (defined as those aged 60 and above) in Marin County are experiencing at increasingly alarming levels. OAC applauds and echoes the Civil Grand Jury's call for the Marin County Board of Supervisors to enact a homelessness prevention strategy focused on the particular needs and vulnerabilities of older adults.

This memo constitutes OAC's response to the Civil Grand Jury's report. It is divided into three sections: (1) a background section that shares information about the mission and history of the Older Adults Committee, (2) a summary of OAC's vision for a set of services and policies to prevent older adult homelessness, and (3) a detailed response to the Findings of Fact and Recommendations in the Civil Grand Jury report.

### **Background**

HPSC comprises the many agencies and organizations working to address homelessness in Marin County. It is charged with providing "a coordinated and strategic approach to planning and management of a range of resources to address the needs of families and individuals at risk of homelessness and those who are currently experiencing homelessness in Marin County."<sup>[1]</sup> Areas of representation within its membership include county agencies, homeless service and housing providers, faith-based organizations, affordable housing developers, probation and law enforcement, hospitals, the business community, prevention services, and more.

OAC began meeting as an informal workgroup of the HPSC in September 2022. It was formed to "learn about and make recommendations to the HPSC regarding ways that the Marin homelessness system of care can better serve older adults experiencing homelessness."<sup>[2]</sup> Recognizing that the system is designed to prioritize those (of any age) with acute needs who have experienced chronic homelessness, by utilizing housing choice vouchers and/or permanent supportive housing (PSH) units, and that the system assumes that short term subsidies and workforce training are adequate to address the needs of people who score low in the coordinated entry assessment (the Rapid Rehousing model), OAC chose to focus on an often overlooked population: "Older adults who have recently become homeless and those who are not prioritized for Permanent Supportive Housing through Coordinated Entry."<sup>[3]</sup> After nearly a year of study, OAC issued a report of its findings and recommendations to the HPSC in August 2023.

Homelessness prevention for older adults was a key concern in that report:

This report highlights the need for innovative solutions, not only for older adults who have recently become homeless, but also for older adults who are at risk of becoming homeless. We need to take an appropriately multi-tiered approach to addressing and preventing homelessness among older adults in our county. Development of permanently affordable housing and permanent supportive housing, expanding our pool of housing vouchers, shallow rent subsidies, and home sharing are among the tools we'll need to enhance. We will also need to continue adapting the system's structure through processes like coordinated entry redesign where we're creating a new needs assessment tool that will better reflect the actual frailty and vulnerability of older Marin residents. Finally, we must ensure that shelters are designed to address mobility and other disability needs as well as healthcare and caretaking needs of older adults.

Existing resources and programs are not sufficient to meet the rising tide of older adult homelessness and the unique needs of older adults who are unhoused or at risk of becoming unhoused. Increased funding from town, city, county, regional, state, and federal governments will be required to adapt our homelessness response and prevention systems towards appropriately addressing the unique needs of older adults. This report is a start in identifying the needs, gaps, and opportunities for change.<sup>[4]</sup>

The OAC report included five recommendations intended to strengthen the homeless system of care for older adults:

**Recommendation #1:** Recognize that older adult homelessness is an emergency, and that the HPSC will align efforts across the homelessness system of care to increase funding and supply of housing to end older adult homelessness.

**Recommendation #2:** Include older adults as a population of focus in upcoming CoC evaluation and planning.

**Recommendation #3:** Include older adults as a population of focus in upcoming local funding processes and competitions (to the extent possible).

**Recommendation #4:** Advise public officials about, and engage in supporting where allowable, legislation and policy that prioritizes or dedicates funds to assist older adults experiencing and at risk of homelessness.

**Recommendation #5:** Vote to approve the Older Adult Committee as a Standing Committee of the HPSC.

The HPSC adopted each of the OAC's recommendations on August 9, 2023.

### **OAC's Vision for Older Adult Homelessness Prevention**

As a standing committee of HPSC, OAC has continued to focus on the portion of the older adult community who are unlikely to be prioritized for a housing choice voucher or permanent supportive housing (PSH) placement under the prioritization scheme used by the homeless system of care's Coordinated Entry system. Many of these individuals and households could avoid homelessness and

remain stably housed through the adoption of a handful of policies and programs that have proved effective in other communities, including:

- **Shallow rent subsidies.** Many older adults in Marin County live on fixed incomes that are simply not enough to make ends meet in the county’s high-cost housing environment. A program that provides a long-term but modest (“shallow”) rental subsidy can help low-income older adults maintain or achieve housing stability.
- **Tenant protections, rent controls and free or low-cost legal services.** Housing stability is extremely important for older adults, who may be living on fixed incomes, have limited mobility, or rely on their homes for social connections and a sense of community. Rent controls prevent sudden and drastic increases in rent, ensuring that older adult renters can continue to afford their living arrangements. Likewise, tenant protections guard against unfair evictions and give older adults a sense of security and stability. Free or low-cost legal aid for low-income older adults who have been issued an unlawful eviction notice is essential for ensuring that tenant protections are equitably enforced for low-income community members.
- **Housing navigation assistance.** Navigating housing options for older adults can be challenging. As individuals age, they may face difficulty with mobility, hearing and vision, making it essential to consider accessibility and ease of use when selecting housing options. Older people also often lack the degree of digital literacy needed to navigate digital spaces like online applications and websites like craigslist. Moreover, declines in executive function can make it particularly difficult for older adults to research available units and safely take the steps necessary to secure them. Older adults in Marin County need targeted support to secure housing, whether it is a conventional, private-market listing, subsidized housing, shared housing or other option.
- **Prevention and diversion screening appropriately targeted to older adults.** Too often, prevention and diversion programs adopt a “one size fits all” approach to prevention and diversion screening. They adopt a set of criteria that are known risk factors for homelessness and target assistance to those meeting the stated criteria. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that risk factors for older adults may not be the same as for the population as a whole. Households with children, for example, are generally at greater risk for homelessness due to the financial strain of housing and providing for more people on limited incomes. However, for older adults, not having children may signal an increased vulnerability to homelessness, as the older adult may have fewer familial connections on which to rely for assistance.

As County agencies and leadership consider their response to the Civil Grand Jury Report, we hope they will adopt policies and practices to enact the above solutions.

## **Responses to Civil Grand Jury Findings of Fact and Recommendations**

### **Findings of Fact**

- F1 Agree
- F2 OAC does not have enough information to conclude that “the lack of a mandate for aging equity by the Marin County Board of Supervisors” leads to “the County not prioritizing the needs of adults aged 60 and above who are homeless or at risk of falling into homelessness.” OAC recognizes that the County’s work to prevent and end

homelessness is a challenging mission pursued with too few resources to achieve it. There are many reasons why the needs of older adults do not get prioritized under the current system. For example, federal constraints in how homelessness resources are allocated may be as much of a barrier to “prioritizing the needs of adults aged 60 and above” as the lack of a County mandate for aging equity.

However, the OAC does agree that a county mandate for Aging Equity would help to move the needle on this and other equity gaps facing older adults in Marin County. We also understand that to be effective, an Aging Equity mandate from the county would need to focus on outcomes, not access.

- F3 OAC agrees that the primary cause of homelessness in Marin County is the lack of affordable housing. As the Civil Grand Jury is no doubt aware, however, older adults face other pathways into homelessness that tend to be overlooked. These include things like the death of a partner, medical emergencies, physical disabilities, cognitive decline, and social isolation. While people of nearly any age might follow similar pathways into homelessness, these pathways are particularly common among older adults.
- F4 Agree.
- F5 Agree.
- F6 Agree.
- F7 OAC has no position as to whether the County Area Agency on Aging is appropriately positioned or resourced to meet its federal mandate.
- F8 OAC would like to see the County pursue and secure more resources for homelessness prevention programs and services for adults aged 60 and above. Nonetheless, we have no basis on which to conclude that the County has lacked diligence in the pursuit of these resources.
- F9 Agree. OAC cautions, however, that a Marin-specific analysis of the relative costs and benefits of investing in measures to prevent homelessness vs. investing in services for people who are already homeless may not be warranted. Existing research finds that homelessness prevention is well worth the investment.<sup>[5]</sup>
- F10 Standardized assessment tools for homelessness prevention are in use in many other Bay Area counties, just not in Marin. In addition, any screening tool developed to identify older adults at risk of homelessness must specifically account for the distinctive risk factors that older adults face, and should be linked to services and supports specifically targeted to the needs of older adults. Again, these tools currently exist and are utilized in other Bay Area counties.
- F11 OAC’s understanding is that the County is currently working to implement the Doorway program.
- F12 Agree. The county has, however, provided nominal financial support for the Home Match program which provides such services. OAC encourages the county to increase its

investment in these services in line with other jurisdictions like San Francisco where over \$800,000/yr is invested in shared housing services.

F13 Agree. OAC notes, however, that the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services released a Request for Proposals on July 8, 2024 for \$250,000 to provide shallow rent subsidies as an intervention for older adults (60+) experiencing homelessness who are not otherwise good candidates for rapid rehousing. This funding was set aside by the HPSC from the CoC allocation of Round 4 of the Homeless Housing, Assistance, and Prevention program. It is designed as a short-term pilot program.

F14 Agree.

### **Recommendations**

R1 Agree. OAC notes that an effective, intersectional DEI strategy must acknowledge that different groups have different needs. It is thus necessary to employ a range of equity lenses in developing and implementing human services strategies. Addressing the equity needs of one group will not address the equity needs of all groups.

R2 Agree. OAC would add that a county strategic plan for prevention should account for the differing needs of unique populations like older adults and avoid replicating the existing limitations of a one-size fits all approach to services and attaining equity therein.

R3 Disagree. Homelessness prevention blends CDA relevant issues like rent control and tenant protections with direct services like housing navigation and delivery of rent subsidies that are more suited to the capacities of HHS. Many counties have therefore created independent homelessness departments that exist in the space between HHS and CDA. OAC believes the county should consider strategies that would prevent prevention from being siloed in either CDA or HHS.

R4 The county has already directed CDA to promote affordable housing options. OAC agrees that the county should issue a directive to provide shared housing and rent subsidies, but cannot conclude that CDA should be the designated department.

R5 Agree. OAC concludes that public education is not sufficient due to the above mentioned barriers older people face in services navigation and calls upon the county to allocate resources towards case management services for older adults along with a public education campaign.

R6 OAC agrees that the Board of Supervisors should issue a directive to develop a unique vulnerability assessment for older people. OAC believes that HHS should be directed to undertake development of this unique assessment as HHS has developed all of the other vulnerability assessments and thus possesses the institutional knowledge to most effectively develop a new assessment. HHS should be directed to work with All Home in developing a vulnerability assessment for older adults at risk of homelessness as All Home has been instrumental in developing similar assessments across 7 of the 9 Bay Area counties.

R7 Agree. OAC notes that while Doorway will help to streamline the housing application process it will not negate the need for case management services to support older people in applying for affordable housing.

R8 Agree.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you, again, for inviting the Older Adults Committee to comment on the Civil Grand Jury's report. The Committee joins in and wishes to amplify the sense of urgency conveyed by the report. Older adults in Marin County are facing a crisis of homelessness. We urge the Board of Supervisors to, at a minimum, allocate funding to establish a shallow rental subsidy program before the end of the year.

We want to recognize the extensive collaborative work of HCC staff and the network of community based organizations to deliver homelessness services in the county. OAC is confident that HCC staff would do an excellent job developing and implementing a prevention strategy if it were determined that HHS is the appropriate home for homelessness prevention. We recognize and appreciate the commitment of BOS, CXO and HHS in working diligently towards addressing homelessness in Marin County and look forward to working to support expansion of these efforts to address the unique needs of older adults in Marin who are at risk of homelessness.

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[1] [Homeless Policy Steering Committee Governance Charter and Bylaws](#), approved by HPSC May 11, 2017, p. 3

[2] Report of the Marin Older Adult Committee (OAC) to the Homeless Policy Steering Committee (HPSC), August 2023, p. 3.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid* at 2.

[5] See, e.g., David C. Phillips, James X. Sullivan; [Do Homelessness Prevention Programs Prevent Homelessness? Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial](#). *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 2023 (finding that communities get back \$2.47 in benefits per net dollar spent on emergency financial assistance).