

**A Response to the 2017-2018 Marin County Civil Grand Jury report  
“Homelessness in Marin: A Progress Report” Published May 17, 2018.**

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Response provided by:

- Christine Paquette, Executive Director, St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin
- Howard Schwartz, PhD, Director of Housing and System Change

If one sets the 2015 and 2018 Civil Grand Jury reports side by side, one gets a sense of the substantial progress Marin has made in addressing homelessness. If anything, the recent 2017-2018 report substantially understates this progress when it writes, “Collaboration between the County and the nonprofit service providers has improved” (p. 11). In fact, a major transformation of the programs and systems of care for the addressing chronic homelessness has occurred in Marin in the last three years. This transformation has been driven by an intensive collaboration between nonprofit organizations, the County, and the cities and towns of Marin and has been informed by an understanding and commitment to a Housing First orientation.

This collaboration and alignment across a broad and influential set of stakeholders is making substantial progress housing our chronically homeless individuals in Marin. When we started this transformation three years ago, there was no common understanding of the solution to this vexing social problem; community-based and health and human services organizations were working in silos; there was substantial distrust; and there was despair that, with the high cost of housing in Marin and finger pointing levied in all directions, there was little any of us could do to help our most vulnerable homeless individuals and families in Marin County get off of the streets for good.

And yet, while we have a substantial effort ahead of us, we have proven that working together is more powerful than working apart and that by holding ourselves collectively responsible for the solution, we can make great progress housing chronically homeless individuals, even in Marin.

At the time of the Civil Grand Jury report, the collaborative, as instantiated in what is called “Coordinated Entry,” had housed twenty of our most vulnerable homeless individuals. Only a few months later (at the time of this writing), that number is up to forty chronically homeless individuals now housed. In addition to this number, our collaborative housed twenty-three chronically vulnerable individuals the prior year, through the implementation of the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), led by the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin.

How did this progress occur? The shift to the Housing First philosophy and methodology, described well by the Grand Jury report, is a key example of the change in orientation which gave rise to immediate and lasting results. Our collaborative comprised of Community-Based Organizations, Health and Human Services agencies, the Marin Housing Authority and County and City Elected officials, has accelerated progress by stressing the importance of following evidence-based practices that are working in other counties similar to Marin, such as San Mateo, CA and Bergen County, NJ. By reaching out to experts in Sonoma County, Alameda County, San Mateo County, (as well in Chicago, Minneapolis and others), we have brought home best practices, such as the Homeless Outreach Team, that have given us immediate and positive outcomes. Against naysayers, we have proven that Housing First can and does work, even in our community, which prides itself on being unique. We have proven that even the individuals who have been homeless and living on the streets for dozens of years can succeed in housing in Marin. We have proven, too, that it costs less to house an individual than to leave them on the street, even in Marin.

With these successes under our belt, we are poised to accelerate our progress. Marin Housing Authority is finding still more landlords who realize they can actually make a profit while having a heart. We have identified real estate developers who want to help us purchase more homes and buildings that are already zoned for housing. We have proven that, even in Marin, we have been able to find creative

ways to leverage already existing resources (without new construction) to give our chronically homeless population a home.

The end of chronic homelessness in Marin is indeed what businesses sometimes call a “BHAG,” a “big hairy audacious goal.” But it is an ambitious goal that can be accomplished. As the Grand Jury report noted:

The leaders of the homeless service organizations have come up with a detailed business plan to bring chronic homelessness to ‘functional zero’.... Based on their collective experience, these energetic, tested professionals believe they can achieve their goal in Marin if all three legs of the stool are adequately funded. This plan represents a major step in bringing together nonprofits and government to provide coordinated service and housing.” (p. 10)

Indeed, it does. As one of the organizations leading this transformation, the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin knows that the energy and momentum that has been created these last three years is palpable. It is the platform on which we can stand to reach the next level. And key to accelerating these efforts is an even greater collaboration and alignment across our County.

To this end, as the Grand Jury Report noted, there are other initiatives underway that build on this momentum. There is now a new organization called *Opening Doors Marin*, a private public collaborative, that is extending this alignment across the County in search of common solutions to homelessness in the County. That effort can help build support for some of the other key steps that have been endorsed by the Grand Jury, such as the expansion of participating landlords, the development of properties that are already zoned for housing, and the expansion of local housing subsidies. And, as noted by the report, there is already an effort underway to shift the existing shelter system managed by Homeward Bound into a housing-focused shelter that plugs into the larger Housing First continuum we have created. These are all critical next steps in the achievable goal of ending chronic homelessness here in Marin.

In this context, it is worth noting our disagreement with the Grand Jury's recommendation that shelter should be expanded with the end of the Rotating Emergency Shelter Team (REST). As the agency that ran the REST program and has an intimate understanding of its benefits and limitations, we perhaps have a unique perspective on this question. Through our exposure to Housing First evidenced-based practices, we have come to understand in a new way the truism that "housing is the only solution to homelessness" and that "housing is healthcare." Evidence shows that, statistically, those who are chronically homeless do not die due to weather-related circumstances. Instead, they die on average twenty-five years younger than the rest of us because of their chronic homelessness; years of living on the streets without access to consistent, preventative medical interventions for heart disease, diabetes, cancer, mental health and other chronic illnesses. While our hearts and compassion are naturally evoked when we see those experiencing chronic homelessness on the street, we have come to understand that the only solution to chronic homelessness is to shift everything we do to a Housing First orientation. That shift includes our shelter system.

While REST brought our community together in compassionate and important ways not seen previously in this county, REST did not help end homelessness. Many times, we saw the same persons, year after year, in our shelter. Unless shelters are rigorously low-barrier, operate 24/7 and are relentlessly focused on the outcome of housing, they can in fact have the opposite effect: institutionalizing homelessness and undermining the motivation for vulnerable people to work with us to get off the streets. It is important to note that although a six-month winter shelter will no longer be available, the County of Marin is currently working with providers to secure an emergency-weather response in the case of extreme weather (cold or hot) for any Marin resident, including those without homes, when a weather emergency is declared. While we are forever appreciative of the dozens of congregations and thousands of volunteers who kept the REST programming operating for ten years, we

do not want the end of REST to become a wedge issue. That debate diverts our energy, our investments and our alignment which provide the basis for us to end chronic homelessness in Marin. Instead, we are looking forward to collaborating with REST congregations and volunteers to engage with our other, housing-focused volunteer opportunities on the horizon. Today, in alignment with best practices, our funding partners at the County and at Marin Community Foundation are enabling us to shift and expand dollars so that we can have a 24/7 Housing Focused shelter at Mill Street and have more bridge housing at our St. Vincent de Paul studio apartments, in order to help us move more people off of the streets and onto the personal journey of securing housing.

We are pleased that the Civil Grand Jury identified some of the progress that has been made to date. While an ambitious goal lies ahead of us, we believe that by further aligning in the community behind the practices of Housing First, and expanding the efforts of *Opening Doors Marin*, we can achieve the goal of ending chronic homelessness in Marin County by the end of 2022, just as Bergen County did in 2017.