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Audit Follow-Up Report # 6, October 2003 Homeless Youth Services Continuum

The County and homeless youth service providers have made good progress towards implementing recommendations. We are concerned about the loss of ability to monitor and evaluate the system's effectiveness.

Background

The Auditor's Office released its report, *Homeless Youth Services Continuum: Review of System Outcomes*, in November 2001. The purpose of the review was to identify risks and assess progress made toward system-level outcomes by the Downtown Homeless Youth Service Continuum (the Continuum). The review did not include an assessment of specific providers or client outcomes, but focused instead on factors contributing to the overall success of the service system.

Homeless youth services have undergone significant changes since 1998 when they were criticized by community groups and the media for a perceived lack of accountability and leadership. The current configuration of services in the Continuum is the result of the County's response to that criticism. The Board of County Commissioners directed the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee, made up of interested community, business, and government representatives, to develop a new model of services.

The Ad Hoc Committee recommended, and the Board approved, a model that consisted of services ranging from immediate relief off the streets to assistance and support in permanently transitioning out of homelessness and becoming productive members of the community. Services included:

- Basic needs and relief services
- 24 hour common space
- Screening
- Assessment
- Crisis shelter
- Case management/service coordination
- Short-term shelter
- Transitional housing

The end result of the redesign process was the awarding of contracts to four (later reduced to three) community-based agencies to provide services. These agencies were required to work in partnership to provide coordinated services to youth. The Continuum is managed by the County's Department of School and Community Partnerships (DSCP). Community oversight is provided by the Homeless Youth Oversight Committee (HYOC), which is made up of business, community, government, provider, and other youth services representatives.

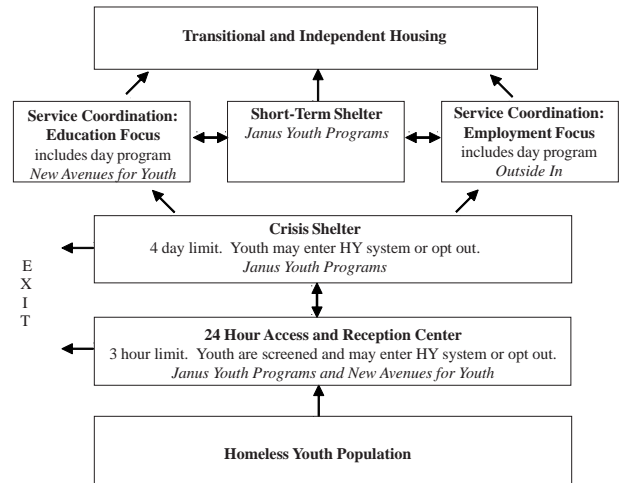
Original Recommendations

In our 2001 review, we found that substantial progress had been made toward creating a system of services for homeless youth that was collaborative, effective, and accountable. We also found significant weaknesses that could affect the Continuum's ability

to achieve the goals of the Ad Hoc Committee. These were:

- Management of the Continuum was not fully aligned with criteria for partnership-based contracts.
- Each party's role in the partnership was not clear.
- Linkages to outside service systems needed strengthening.
- The Youth Development Model had not been fully implemented.
- There were no formal procedures for following up on audit, evaluation, and monitoring reports.
- The intended client population was not clearly defined.

Current Homeless Youth Services Flowchart



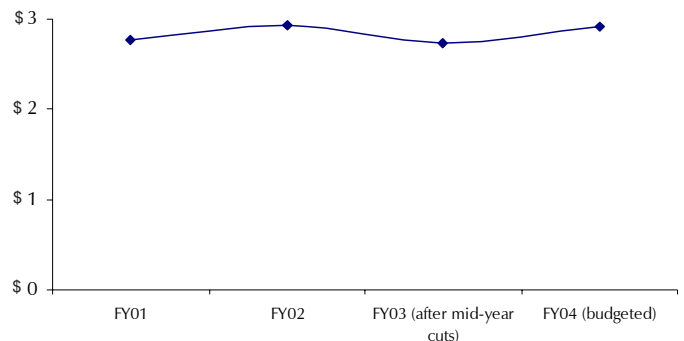
We made recommendations to address each of these findings in the original report. The County Chair and acting Department Director generally agreed with the recommendations and outlined their plans for addressing each of them. In addition, the Department sent our office supplemental materials and explanations of progress made to date in January 2003.

The Continuum has a substantial commitment of public resources. In FY1998, before the major redesign, \$810,346 was spent on services to homeless youth. This amount has grown to \$3,251,037 budgeted for FY2004.

System Recently Modified

The system was modified again by a subcommittee of the HYOC that prepared a competitive Request for Proposals for new five year contracts effective on July 1, 2003. The new design changes the focus of the system to engaging youth quickly and limiting services to those youth who are not willing to commit to further services. Once youth do commit to further services, they are assigned to an agency in either an education or employment track, which becomes a primary focus of their services. These new education and employment tracks and shorter lengths of stay at the front end represent a significant move away from the 1998 Ad Hoc Committee's design. That original design offered more relief-based services in order to reduce the harm to youth living on the streets, as well as services to help them transition out of homelessness. The recent RFP indicates that changes were made in order to improve engagement rates and to increase the focus on youth outcomes.

Downtown Homeless Youth Services Expenditures*
(constant \$, in millions)



*Does not include \$131,683 from Portland Public Schools or \$200,000 from Department of Community Justice for new programs in FY04

Despite fairly stable spending for core services at approximately \$2.8 million over the past three years, the overall number of youth served appears to have declined since FY2001. Although various reports show differing numbers of clients served, the available data indicate decreases in the number screened, the number assessed, and the number in crisis shelter, while the numbers in short-term shelters and service coordination vacillate. The most current data indicate that just over 700 were served in FY2003, considerably fewer than the 1,000 youth the system was designed and funded to serve.

Scope and Methodology

The scope of this follow up was limited to assessing progress made on implementing the recommendations in the 2001 report. To make these determinations, we interviewed County staff and management, each of the three Continuum providers, and five members of the Homeless Youth Oversight Committee. We also reviewed numerous documents, including HYOC meeting minutes, the recent Request for Proposal, contracts and program instructions, working agreements, evaluation information, and other documents provided by the Department.

As a result of our review, we identified at least two potential future audit areas: 1) an analysis of cost per youth, and 2) assessment of the amount of service provided to youth.

This Follow-Up was included in our FY2003 audit schedule and was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Accomplishments

DSCP and the Homeless Youth Continuum have made good progress in implementing most of the recommendations from the 2001 review. A list of each recommendation and summary of progress on implementation are provided in the table below. Additional concerns and accomplishments follow.

The level of collaboration within the Continuum has improved a great deal since the initial redesign in 1998. Despite the fact that the three agencies do not always agree on their philosophies toward serving youth, they have overcome differences to support projects, jointly apply for and win grant awards, coordinate services, and agree on most issues facing the Continuum as a whole. In addition, providers

Original Recommendation	Status
1. Bring management of the Continuum into alignment with established criteria for partnership-based contracts to increase the likelihood of achieving mutual goals.	<u>Ongoing.</u> Day-to-day management of the Continuum occurs in a collaborative environment. However, the fact that contracts are still let competitively could jeopardize the partnership. The stability of the system depends on shared responsibility, trust, and decision-making. A competitive system can put these elements at risk. See below.
2a. Clearly spell out the expectations of County leadership, management, and staff regarding their responsibilities in the partnership.	<u>Implemented.</u> Providers reported no problems in this area.
2b. Define expectations of providers in working with the County, the HYOC, and other providers regarding their responsibilities in the partnership.	<u>Implemented.</u> Providers seem to be clear about their roles. However, concerns remain about the extent to which true partnership can exist in a competitive contracting environment.
2c. Adopt a mission for the HYOC that allows it to both ensure the effective implementation of the original system design and support the Continuum to expand and improve.	<u>Partially implemented.</u> Although some work has been done to clarify the role of the HYOC, nothing has yet been formalized or adopted and some HYOC members remain unclear about the purpose and expectations of the HYOC.
2d. Establish a clear purpose, set parameters of authority, operational bylaws, and formal leadership for the HYOC to ensure its effectiveness.	<u>Implemented.</u>
3. Improve linkages to outside systems and providers of other services to homeless youth to increase the likelihood of youth attainment of outcomes.	<u>Ongoing.</u> Linkages with some outside systems, such as the Youth Investment System and the Police Bureau, have improved. Others need attention, particularly with the adult homeless system and foster care. This is an issue that will need constant attention.
4. Implement the Youth Development Model to ensure service quality and shared philosophy.	<u>Implemented.</u> Each agency has a youth development plan in place and has incorporated these principles into their contract bids, but there are no plans in place to monitor or evaluate these efforts.
5. Establish procedures for following up and taking action on findings from evaluations, audits, monitoring reports, and other research conducted to maximize the benefit of knowledge gained from these efforts.	<u>Partially implemented.</u> No formal procedures have been established, but there is evidence that the HYOC and subcommittees review reports and use them in decision making. We have serious concerns about the diminished capacity for evaluation and monitoring. See below.
6. Clarify definition of intended client population, including prioritization of subpopulations, if appropriate, in order to increase the effectiveness of services.	<u>Implemented.</u> Parameters have been set around eligibility for Continuum services, but the effects of these parameters should receive on-going evaluation.

report that cooperation and collaboration at the line staff level is exceptional. Relationships with the County appear to have improved as well, ensuring that partnership is the norm on a day-to-day basis in the Continuum. The benefits of collaboration are clear in increasing the Continuum's ability to attract outside funding, leverage public funding, and present a cohesive system of services to youth.

Members of the Continuum have also made progress toward improving linkages to outside service systems and agencies:

- Received a Robert Wood Johnson grant to provide for alcohol and drug treatment, creating connections between Homeless Youth providers and treatment agencies.
- Developed a working agreement between the Youth Investment System and the Homeless Youth Continuum detailing how each will respond to runaways or youth who are candidates for reunification with their families.
- Implemented a partnership agreement between the Continuum and the Portland Police Bureau that has improved coordination and cooperation.
- Merged the Homeless Youth Access Center with the Reception Center, which is a place for police to take runaways and status offenders who have not committed crimes serious enough to take them to Juvenile Detention. This generates efficiencies and creates a single access point for teens in need of services.

Finally, the Continuum was able to sustain itself through a difficult RFP and contract award process this year. Changes in philosophy, consolidation, and elimination of some services in the RFP took many by surprise and caused some uncertainty, according to providers. At the time of this report, issues that arose around contract awards and program specifications as a result of the RFP were being worked out and all involved believe that the Continuum will be able to move forward and continue to collaborate in the future.

Areas of Concern

Loss of Evaluation Capacity

Our greatest concern about the current status of the Homeless Youth Continuum is the loss of evaluation capacity. We had previously found this to be one of the system's greatest strengths, but it is now a pressing need in the Continuum. In the 1 ½ years since the release of our report in 2001, resources dedicated to data management and evaluation of the system were eliminated due to budget cuts at DSCP. In the interim, only a few data reports were produced, which provided information on some important elements of the system, but did not consistently provide workload information such as number of youth served overall and in each service element. Knowledge of basic population and service numbers is essential for day-to-day management of the system, accountability, mid-stream changes, and long-term planning.

The move of all data collection to DSCP's Crosswalk database should increase the ability of County staff to access data and run reports, but it will not replace the need to have an independent, professional evaluation to analyze outcomes and help interpret cause and effect.

Changes to Original Ad Hoc Committee Design

The current redesign of the Homeless Youth Continuum represents a significant divergence from the system designed by the Ad Hoc Committee in 1998. The original model included many more services at the front end of the system and more time for youth to engage in services. Ongoing relief services are now only available to youth who sign up for service coordination. The new contracts do not include funding for Greenhouse, which was the place where youth could come to rest and receive basic needs supplies without necessarily having to commit to entering service coordination immediately. The goal is to reduce to a few hours the amount of time youth can spend at the Access and Reception Center before deciding to sign up for service coordination, down from an unlimited amount of time in the previous contract. The number of nights youth can stay in crisis shelter per month without entering service coordination has also been reduced to four from an estimated average length of stay of 14 days in the last contract. According to the

Department, these changes were an attempt to move youth through the front end of the system and into service coordination faster.

We are concerned about the possible effects of the recent changes in design. This shift in policy limits the eligible service population to those youth who are ready and willing to leave the streets and progress through the system. A possible consequence is further isolation of “hard core” homeless youth from services. DCSP and HYOC need to pay close attention to what happens at the front end of the system and determine whether new policies create disincentives for youth to seek out and engage in services.

Because this represents such a significant change in policy, we believe that the design decisions should have been made by the body that had policy setting authority for the Continuum. This issue relates to the continuing problem of confusion around the role and authority of the HYOC.

Challenges to Partnership

The Continuum continues to face a number of challenges regarding partnership and collaboration. Providers are expected to collaborate amongst themselves and with the County as if in full partnership, but are then set to compete for resources when a new RFP is issued. Decision-making authority, which would be a joint task between the County and providers in a full partnership, is complicated by the presence and activity of the HYOC. The Department also feels tension in its dual role as a partner with providers and contract enforcement agent for the County.

This situation creates additional limitations on collaboration and partnership as providers have little input into service design, agencies vie for service dollars, and contracts are negotiated. Whether this competition will erode the partnership is unknown at this point, but the stability of the Continuum is certainly more at risk the further it moves away from partnership. A partnership can still exist within a competitive contracting model, but the potential effects of competition on the partnership need to be fully considered in making procurement decisions. Having a competitive RFP process does not invalidate the partnership, but it can put it at risk. This issue will need to be revisited and monitored throughout the life of the current contract and into the planning of the next.

HYOC

The HYOC continues to operate without a mission statement, although it has recently adopted bylaws and formalized its structure. Some members continue to express confusion about the role of the HYOC in the Continuum and are concerned that there is not a clearer sense of purpose. Without clarity of role and authority, the HYOC operates in an environment of uncertainty and its decisions and recommendations may not have the force they need to bring about change in the Continuum. Management indicates that plans are underway to address this.

The HYOC continues to have tangible benefits and real potential to increase the accountability, visibility, and community support of the Homeless Youth Continuum. Members cite the benefits of involvement, including staying abreast of developments and having contacts and connections with other agencies. However, a committee of this sort needs direction and assigned tasks in order to maintain its usefulness.

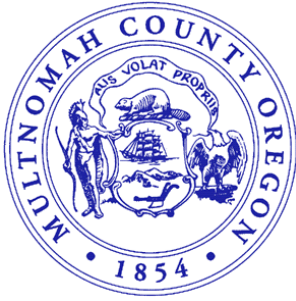
Finally, we believe that the composition of the HYOC needs to be reviewed once a mission is adopted. In our opinion, a policy setting committee should be made up of a balance of community interests, outside experts on youths’ developmental needs, providers, and youth. An oversight committee with limited decision-making authority could have a broader representation from stakeholders. Whatever decision is made about the scope of authority for the HYOC, there needs to be attention on maintaining the balance of interests and ensuring that there are experts in what works for youth on the Committee.

Cost per Client

As noted above, department data indicate that the number of clients being served, especially at the front end of the system, has dropped over the last few years and is lower than the original target of 1,000 youth per year. At the same time, the cost of serving youth has remained stable and has even risen slightly with the most recent redesign. We are concerned that cost per client is rising without a solid understanding of these costs by policy makers or the HYOC. For example, it is unknown whether current funding for the system is now adequate, whether it is underfunded, or whether it is inefficient or too expensive for the services received.

Follow-Up Recommendations

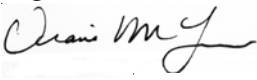

1. Prioritize evaluation and monitoring to build accountability back into the system. This may mean additional funding or reallocation of existing funds.
2. Establish a clear statement of mission and purpose for the HYOC to ensure its effectiveness.
3. Continue to manage the Continuum on a day-to-day basis as a partnership and monitor the effects of competition for consideration in planning the next RFP.
4. Continue working to establish linkages with outside service agencies to increase the scope of services available and make transitions between agencies smoother. In particular, linkages with the adult homeless system and state foster care system need improvement.
5. Monitor the effects of the new policy, which limits relief off the streets services to those who are not fully engaged in service coordination, and adjust policies if necessary.



Diane M. Linn, Multnomah County Chair

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TO: Suzanne Flynn, County Auditor
Sarah Landis, Senior Management Auditor

FROM: Diane M. Linn, Chair 
Lorenzo T. Poe, Jr. Director, OSCP 

DATE: October 21, 2003

RE: Response to Follow-up Review of the Homeless Youth Services Continuum

Thank you for the information provided by your follow-up report on the Homeless Youth Services Continuum. Your feedback will assist us in continuing to develop the Homeless Youth System partnership and enhance the service delivery system.

There is general agreement regarding the areas of concern listed in the report along with the follow-up recommendations. We recognize the need to address these issues and agree that they will further enhance both the partnership and the services provided in the Continuum.

Following is a response to each of the follow-up recommendations listed in the report;

1. Evaluation is a critical tool for determining system impacts and areas for improvement. The lack of resources to support this important program component is of great concern. The reinstatement of evaluation will be a high priority when resources become available.
2. Bylaws for the Homeless Youth Oversight Committee were formalized and adopted in September 2003 by HYOC members. The Bylaws define the purpose and scope of the Committee, including parameters of authority, representation, and member roles. A mission statement has been drafted and will be finalized by HYOC members at the November meeting.
3. OSCP will review the procurement process for homeless youth services as we near the end of the current RFP to take into consideration impacts on the partnership model.

4. The Homeless Youth System Work Plan for this fiscal year outlines a strategy to improve coordination with other service systems that interface with the Homeless Youth System. These include the Adult Homeless System and DHS, with the ultimate goal of developing agreements between these systems to ensure on-going communication and coordination.
5. OSCP is committed to closely monitoring service utilization and outcome data to assess the impacts of the system redesign and to make program changes accordingly. OSCP will conduct a six month data review on all Homeless Youth Continuum Programs to determine impacts of recent changes to the system design. Where necessary, programmatic changes will be modified to ensure that the system is providing youth safety off the streets as well as engagement into service coordination.

It is important to recognize how far this continuum of services and this partnership has come in the last few years. With the help of our partners (the members of the HYOC, Janus Youth Programs, Outside In, and New Avenues for Youth) we took a patchwork of agencies and services and organized them into an integrated, high functioning system of care that is increasing positive outcomes for vulnerable youth.

We appreciate your thorough analysis of the Homeless Youth Continuum and look forward to implementing your recommendations in order to further strengthen this service system and the partnerships that are so vital to the system's ability to effectively serve youth.