

# SYSTEMS WORK BETTER TOGETHER:

Strengthening Public Workforce  
& Homeless Service Systems  
Collaboration



**MARCH 2018**

**HEARTLAND ALLIANCE**

NATIONAL INITIATIVES

# Report Information

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**Project team:** Carrie Felton, Tara Maguire, Amy Rynell, Caitlin C. Schnur, Chris Warland, Carl Wiley, and Melissa Young

**Practitioner interviews:** Tara Maguire, Chris Warland, and Carl Wiley

**Writers:** Tara Maguire, Caitlin C. Schnur, Chris Warland, and Melissa Young

**Editors:** Amy Rynell and Chris Warland

**Primary authors:** Caitlin C. Schnur and Melissa Young

**Report design:** Caitlin C. Schnur

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## Heartland Alliance

Heartland Alliance, one of the world's leading anti-poverty organizations, works in communities in the U.S. and abroad to serve those who are experiencing homelessness, living in poverty, or seeking safety. Heartland Alliance provides a comprehensive array of services in the areas of safety, health, housing, education, economic opportunity, and justice—and leads state and national policy efforts which target lasting change for individuals and build towards a society of equity and opportunity for all.

## National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity

Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity is dedicated to ending chronic unemployment and poverty. We believe that every person deserves the opportunity to succeed in work and support themselves and their families. Through our field building, we provide support and guidance that fosters more effective and sustainable employment efforts. Our policy and advocacy work advances solutions to the systemic issues that drive chronic unemployment.

### Our national initiatives include:

The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN)

The National Center on Employment & Homelessness (NCEH)

Black Men & Youth Overcoming Barriers & Realizing Employment (B.MORE) Initiative

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  - **Destination: Home | San Jose, CA:** Chad Bojorquez
  - **Workforce Solutions – Gulf Coast Workforce Board | Houston, TX:** Omar Fortune
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  - **Homeward | Richmond, VA:** Kelly King Horne, Gabrielle Pearman, Erika Schmale
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  - **Maricopa County Human Services Department | Phoenix, AZ:** Bruce Liggett
  - **Mayor's Office of Employment Development | Baltimore, MD:** Jason Perkins-Cohen
  - **Mayor's Office of Human Services | Baltimore, MD:** Hannah Roberts
  - **Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development | St. Paul, MN:** Lawrence Eisenstadt
  - **Portland Housing Bureau | Portland, OR:** Jennifer Chang
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# Introduction & Methodology

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The public workforce system and homeless service system both encounter and serve jobseekers experiencing homelessness or housing instability. A wealth of evidence links employment success and housing stability. The public workforce system's goal is to help people succeed in employment, while the homeless service system's goal is to get people stably housed. To achieve these interconnected goals, the public workforce system has a clear stake in its participants' housing stability and the homeless service system has one in its participants' access to employment and economic opportunity. These systems can best achieve their interrelated goals through collaboration.

More often than not, however, the public workforce and homeless service systems have worked in silos. Systems stakeholders have not fully recognized that they share a responsibility to support both the employment and housing needs of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers who are trying to access their respective services and supports. That being said, there are innovative local efforts underway—including those of the Connections Project—to spur collaboration among the public workforce, homeless service, and other systems to support access to and success in employment and housing for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

This paper draws on over a dozen in-depth interviews with public workforce and homeless service systems leaders across the country as well as the work of our five Connections Project sites. Through these interviews, we identified common barriers to systems collaboration between the public workforce system and homeless service system as well as recommendations for how to address these barriers to help ensure that homeless and unstably housed jobseekers can access employment and economic opportunity and stabilize in housing.

## ***About the Connections Project***

***Launched by Heartland Alliance's National Center on Employment & Homelessness (NCEH), the Connections Project is a three-year, place-based, systems-level collaboration and capacity-building project aimed at increasing employment and economic opportunity for homeless jobseekers.***

***Through a competitive process, NCEH identified five Connections Projects Sites in 2015: Baltimore, MD; Chicago, IL; Houston, TX; Minneapolis/Hennepin County, MN; and Seattle/King County, WA.***

# I. What is Systems Collaboration and Why Does it Matter for the Public Workforce and Homeless Service Systems?

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This section provides a working definition of systems collaboration and makes the case for collaboration between the public workforce and homeless service systems.

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Public systems are better at solving big problems when they work together. Public systems can work together at different scales and at differing levels of intensity that evolve over time. While systems may begin to work together by exchanging information or aligning available services, systems collaboration “involves a change in business as usual” that is characterized by significant time commitments, high levels of trust, and extensive turf overlap among cross-system stakeholders.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, **systems collaboration** can be understood as **a process in which public systems share risks, responsibilities, and rewards as they work toward achieving mutually beneficial goals and a common purpose.** Systems collaboration entails public systems exchanging information, altering their activities, using resources differently, and enhancing each other’s capacity to do effective work.

In the context of the public workforce and homeless service systems, collaboration is essential because 1) the overarching goals that these systems have for their participants—success in employment and housing stability, respectively—are closely linked and 2) neither system, working on its own, has the resources, capacity, or expertise to support individuals in achieving both of these interconnected outcomes. As a result, these systems must collaborate to help ensure that appropriate employment and housing services and supports exist at scale in communities and that the individuals served by these systems can access these resources.

## *What do we mean by the public workforce system and the homeless service system?*

*This paper examines systems collaboration between the public workforce system as authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 and the homeless service system as funded through the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program under the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009. Both of these systems are described in greater detail on pages seven to 10. Although other funding streams can support workforce development activities and homeless services, WIOA and the CoC Program constitute the basis of the public workforce and homeless service systems, respectively. WIOA and the CoC Program’s governance structures, flow of funding, and performance metrics most often steer the implementation of workforce development and homeless services in communities.*

## II. The Public Workforce & Homeless Service Systems: A Primer

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This section gives an overview of the public workforce system and homeless service system, including these systems' governance structures, responsibilities, and funding flows.

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### **The Public Workforce System & the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act**

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) authorizes and guides the public workforce system. Under WIOA, the public workforce system aims to increase employment and economic opportunity for jobseekers facing barriers to employment.

WIOA has six core programs.<sup>1</sup> American Job Centers (AJCs) implement or provide access to the employment, training, education, and other services authorized under these core programs. An AJC may also implement or provide access to related services funded through non-WIOA federal, state, or local programs. For example, an AJC may administer employment services funded through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, or cash assistance) program.

### **WIOA Governance Structure & Responsibilities**

Under WIOA, state and local planning councils called Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) govern and administer the public workforce system. The majority of WDB members must be business representatives. Local and state boards may elect to have community-based organizations with expertise serving the employment needs of people facing barriers to employment participate on the board. More information about the functions of state and local WDBs can be found in this [resource](#).

WIOA requires states to create a single Unified State Plan that describes the state's overall workforce development strategy. Local WIOA plans must align with the state plan's strategy. WIOA gives states the flexibility to develop a Combined State Plan to guide their public workforce system in coordination with other public system, such as employment and training activities funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

### **WIOA and HUD Combined State Planning**

*WIOA allows states to submit Combined State Plans describing how the workforce and homeless service systems can work together. This is a unique opportunity for these systems to align services to help meet their mutually beneficial goal of increasing employment and economic opportunity among homeless jobseekers. Learn more [here](#).*

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**Under WIOA, youth and adults experiencing homelessness include individuals who 1) lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; 2) are considered “doubled-up” or are living in a motel, hotel, trailer park, or campground; 3) are awaiting foster care placement; or 4) are migratory children. The full definition is [here](#).**

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State and local [WIOA plans](#) must include a number of elements related to addressing the employment and skill needs of people facing barriers to employment, including: 1) an assessment of workforce needs in the state and local community; 2) the strategic vision for meeting the needs of populations facing barriers to employment; and 3) a description of how the local WDB in particular will expand access to employment, training, education, and supportive services for eligible individuals facing barriers to employment.

### **WIOA Title I Program Funding**

WIOA Title I programs provide workforce development activities for adults, youth, and dislocated workers. WIOA Title I resources flow into communities as formula grants targeting these three populations. The grant formula accounts for the relative number of unemployed individuals and economically disadvantaged adults and youth within a state or local area.<sup>2</sup> The majority of WIOA Title I funds are designated for local area programming. Governors may also have some discretionary funds reserved from each Title I funding stream for program administration, statewide activities, or [innovation](#). In Fiscal Year 2017, WIOA Title I funding equaled about \$2.7 billion.<sup>3</sup> The lion’s share of these funds went to dislocated workers, who are unlikely to be experiencing homelessness. Aside from a resource infusion in 2009 via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, WIOA funding has been on the decline for over a decade.

### **Populations Served Through WIOA Title I Program Funds**

All jobseekers can receive services funded through WIOA Title I. One of WIOA’s legislative purposes, however, is to increase access to and opportunities for employment, education, training, and support services for jobseekers facing barriers to employment.<sup>4</sup> As a result, AJC staff must prioritize recipients of public assistance, low-income individuals, and individuals who are basic skills deficient in the provision of more intensive, individualized career services. This priority does not necessarily mean that individualized career or other employment services may *only* be provided to these populations. WIOA also prioritizes that at least 75 percent of youth formula funds must be spent serving out-of-school youth, including youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

More information about WIOA can be through our [WIOA Planning & Implementation Toolkit](#) and the U.S. Department of Labor’s [website](#).

**Aside from a resource infusion in 2009 via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, WIOA funding has been on the decline for over a decade.**

i. WIOA’s six core employment, training, and education programs are: 1,2, and 3) the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs (Title I); 4) the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act program (Title II); 5) the Employment Service program authorized under the Wagner-Peyser Act (Title III); and 6) the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program (Title IV).



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***The HEARTH Act requires that each community establish a Continuum of Care (CoC), which acts as the community's planning body to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness or a housing crisis.***

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### **The Homeless Service System and the HEARTH Act's Continuum of Care Program<sup>6</sup>**

The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 consolidated multiple separate homeless assistance programs into a single grant program called the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program.

The CoC Program's purpose is to assist and provide adults and youth experiencing homelessness with the services necessary to help them move into housing and toward long-term stability. The CoC Program allows each community to tailor its approach to addressing homelessness to that community's strengths and challenges. The CoC Program aims to promote a community-wide and coordinated systems-level approach to ending homelessness rather than an uncoordinated, program-based approach.

To carry out the CoC Program, the HEARTH Act requires that each community establish a CoC, which acts as the community's planning body to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness or a housing crisis. A CoC is established by representatives of relevant organizations within a geographic area. The CoC must decide on the geographic area that it will cover, which can be one or more cities or counties, a balance of state that excludes areas covered by other continuums, or statewide.<sup>7</sup> While the organizations and individuals that make up each CoC will be tailored to its community, HUD expects CoC membership to include representatives from a wide range of organizations that have a stake in ending homelessness such as social service providers, hospitals, universities, law enforcement, and businesses, among others.

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***The CoC coordinates and implements a housing and service system aimed at meeting the needs of people experiencing homelessness within the CoC's jurisdiction.***

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### ***Continuum of Care Governance Structure & Responsibilities***

The CoC is responsible for coordinating and implementing a housing and service system that meets the needs of people experiencing homelessness within its geographic area. To do so, HUD requires that each CoC establish a board. CoCs can also establish committees and work groups, made up of CoC members, to help fulfill its responsibilities. The CoC board must include at least one person who is experiencing or has experienced homelessness. The board must also have members who represent the organizations and projects serving homeless subpopulations, such as families with children and unaccompanied youth, among others. The CoC board's roles and responsibilities must be reflected in a governance charter.

Some of the CoC's responsibilities include to:

- Establish program performance targets, monitor program performance, and evaluate outcomes;
- Establish and operate a coordinated assessment system that assesses the housing and services needs of people experiencing homelessness within the CoC and includes clear policy on to triage and address those needs;

- Develop a housing and service system, in coordination with mainstream resources,<sup>ii</sup> that includes outreach, engagement, and assessment strategies; shelter, housing, and supportive services; and homelessness prevention strategies;
- Conduct a Point-In-Time count of homeless persons within its geographic area;
- Conduct an annual gaps analysis of the homeless needs and services available within its geographic area; and
- Designate and operate a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

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***HUD's annual Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) signals to CoCs the types of homeless service projects that HUD is seeking to fund in communities.***

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### ***Continuum of Care Program Funding***

HUD awards CoC Program funding competitively through its annual Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) process. In addition to the responsibilities above, a core function of the CoC is to prepare and submit an annual application in response to HUD's NOFA. The annual NOFA includes HUD's overarching homeless policy and program priorities, which signal to CoCs the types of projects that HUD is seeking to fund in communities. Although CoCs have local discretion to establish priorities around the types of projects that they want to submit for funding consideration, HUD's signals can and do guide local decision-making processes and priorities. In Fiscal Year 2017, HUD awarded \$2 billion for the CoC Program.<sup>8</sup>

More information about the CoC Program can be found through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's [website](#).

***“It’s in the best interest of these systems to work together. On the workforce side, it’s terrifying when someone’s housing is unstable—how are they going to maintain their job search or keep their job? At the same time, for homeless services providers to really end homelessness, they need to help people meet their economic as well as housing goals. Both systems need each other.”***

***– Nancy Phillips, Heartland Human Care Services, Inc., Chicago, IL***

ii. Mainstream resources are federal, state, and local programs that serve low-income individuals. These resources are not specifically targeted toward people experiencing homelessness but can be leveraged to support this population's needs and interests. More information can be found [here](#).

# III. Challenges to Local Public Workforce and Homeless Service Systems Collaboration

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This section draws from the insights of public workforce and homeless service systems stakeholders to identify and examine common challenges to collaboration between these two systems in communities.

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## **Few Carrots, Few Sticks: Systems Are Not Incentivized to Meet the Employment Needs and Interests of Homeless or Unstably Housed Jobseekers**

Having resources dedicated to solving a shared challenge along with clear accountability mechanisms are important incentives that can push systems toward collaborative work. Nationally, however, there is no single federal agency—and very few federal funds—dedicated to meeting the employment needs and interests of individuals and families who are homeless and unstably housed.

In addition to very few resources, there is no clear, consistent system of accountability that holds federal public workforce and homeless service systems and on-the-ground programs responsible for advancing employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

As described by individuals interviewed for this paper, limited resources and little accountability can and do undermine nearly every aspect of public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration.

Unpacking how Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) prioritize who is eligible to receive workforce services shows that the system lacks clear incentives to serve homeless and unstably housed jobseekers, particularly adults. While one of WIOA's goals is to increase employment and economic opportunity for people who face barriers to employment, this does not translate into clear directives for the system to serve particular populations of jobseekers, such as jobseekers experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

### ***Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP)***

***HVRP, through the Department of Labor, is one of the only dedicated federal funding resources for employment services for a subset of individuals experiencing homelessness: veterans. In FY2017, the program had an operating budget of \$45 million.***

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***“The mainstream workforce system is not incentivized to seek out or prioritize homeless jobseekers, because it is already serving lots of people who face numerous barriers.”***

***– Hannah Roberts,  
Mayor’s Office of  
Human Services,  
Baltimore, MD***

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WIOA legislation and guidance does require American Job Center (AJC) staff to give recipients of public assistance, other low-income individuals, and individuals who are basic skills deficient priority for individualized career and training services, but does *not* require AJCs to prioritize people experiencing homelessness for these types of intensive career services. Instead, WIOA allows local WDBs and the Governor to establish additional priority populations from among a statutorily-defined list of numerous populations who face barriers to employment that includes people experiencing homelessness as one possibility.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, communities have a great deal of flexibility and discretion when it comes to identifying and serving specific priority populations. However, because there are no dedicated resources for homeless jobseekers, no specific performance targets that communities have to meet for serving this population, and many other people facing barriers to employment who could be prioritized for services, communities have no clear incentive to direct intensive career services toward homeless and unstably housed jobseekers in particular.

On the HUD side, there is also limited funding and accountability for advancing the employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

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***“We need to create accountability, not just send money to workforce system and hope they serve individuals and families that are homeless or unstably housed.”***

***– Chad Bojorquez,  
Destination: Home,  
Santa Clara County,  
CA***

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In recent years, HUD has de-prioritized funding for Supportive Services Only projects, which provided dedicated services to people experiencing homelessness, including employment and training services.<sup>10</sup> While HUD’s system performance measures are increasingly focused on capturing and understanding gains in income and employment for people who stay in or exit Continuum of Care (CoC) Program-funded housing interventions, this performance measurement approach does not necessarily translate into incentives for local systems and providers to infuse their homeless service programs with income and employment services and resources.

***Because there are no dedicated resources for homeless jobseekers, no specific performance targets that communities have to meet for serving this population, and many other people facing barriers to employment who could be prioritized for WIOA services, communities have no clear incentive to direct intensive career services toward homeless and unstably housed jobseekers in particular.***

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***“At the start of our Connections Project in Chicago, we didn’t have data about the employment needs of people experiencing homelessness. Systems don’t ask what they don’t want to know—if they ask, then they have to do something about it.” – Carrie Thomas, Chicago Jobs Council, Chicago, IL***

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Indeed, competitive funding for the homeless service system through the annual Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) process does not explicitly drive the development of CoC projects that include employment services or prioritize such projects for federal resources.

Practically speaking, the public workforce and homeless service systems’ lack of dedicated resources and clear accountability mechanisms aimed at meeting the employment needs and interests of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers has a number of ripple effects that stymie systems collaboration efforts.

Without dedicated resources for these jobseekers, local leaders often do not have clear pathways for developing, scaling, or streamlining employment programs and services for homeless or unstably housed jobseekers in their communities. Moreover, with the levers of accountability for serving these jobseekers being either weak or nonexistent, it is difficult to spur cross-system stakeholders at all levels of government to action and to cultivate champions who are willing to advance systems collaboration efforts.

### **Not Asking & Not Telling: Lack of Data Collection, Sharing, and Integration Contribute to Knowledge Gaps and Blind Spots Between Systems**

Cross-system collaboration requires that systems stakeholders have the information they need to understand that they have an overlapping service population with unmet needs or interests that their combined expertise could address. To this end, it is essential to collect, share, and, where possible, integrate data relevant to both systems.

When it comes to advancing employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers, public workforce and homeless service systems stakeholders may not have a full picture of the scope and scale of their shared service population, this shared population’s employment-related needs and interests, existing service gaps in their communities, or other important information that can support collaborative action. Challenges with collecting, sharing, and integrating data contribute to these knowledge gaps.

***“The homeless service system is not well-resourced to address the housing instability of many individuals in workforce programs. As the CoC Program increasingly prioritizes the most vulnerable, there are very few resources available to those who are doubled up or lose their housing while working or participating in a training program. We can’t offer enough to workforce providers and their clients who are seeking support from the CoC to address these types of housing concerns.”***

***– Hannah Roberts, Mayor’s Office of Human Services, Baltimore, MD***

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***“In Baltimore, our homeless service system was hesitant to ask about employment because connecting people to the workforce wasn’t always seen as a core responsibility of the system. On the WIOA side, it’s hard to find reliable data on housing instability among clients. It’s the same idea: serving homeless and unstably housed clients is not seen as WIOA’s primary responsibility.”***  
***– Hannah Roberts, Mayor’s Office of Human Services, Baltimore, MD***

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On the public workforce side, although many WIOA system programs require staff to record data related to the housing status of individuals entering the system, there are often challenges at the local level collecting this information. Some of these challenges are that 1) these data are self-reported and individuals may not want to disclose that they are unstably housed for concern that it may risk employment opportunities; 2) participants may have to prove—through paperwork or other means that could be difficult to obtain—that they are homeless; and 3) WIOA intake staff can determine service eligibility without ascertaining an individual’s housing status.

As WIOA implementation moves forward, it is also unclear if the workforce system will track housing status as individuals receive different kinds of employment services. If these data are not collected, it will be difficult to determine if the workforce system is serving homeless and unstably housed jobseekers through more intensive services, how these participants are faring, and what other supports may be needed to help them succeed.

With regard to data collection on the homeless service side, the HEARTH Act’s system performance measures require that CoCs collect and report on employment and income growth for adults staying in and exiting CoC Program-funded housing interventions. CoCs are still in their first years of collecting and reporting these data and have faced challenges doing so accurately. Moreover, these data elements focus on changes in income from employment and non-employment sources rather than the employment needs, interests, and activities of homeless and unstably housed individuals. Interviews conducted for this paper and survey data reveal substantial variation in how and if homeless service organizations and communities gather this important additional information.

The public workforce and homeless service systems’ data collection limitations and inconsistencies mean that system stakeholders are often missing the critical information they need to even make the case for collaborative action to advance employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

In areas where these data *are* collected, data sharing and integrating is key to identifying trends and supporting collaborative, cross-system processes and decision making such as when, where, and how to provide services and supports or how to align outcomes and measure success among a shared service population.

***“Not having a common information management system between the workforce and homeless services systems is certainly a huge challenge for collaboration. We have to create innovative workarounds.”*** – Omar Fortune, Workforce Solutions–Gulf Coast Workforce Board, Houston, TX

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***“There’s a stigma that exists about the employability of homeless jobseekers, and the public workforce system’s programs typically don’t focus on housing stability. As a result, homeless service providers who want to connect people to work have had to put together their own internal employment services because otherwise these services are not accessible.”***  
***– Hannah Roberts, Mayor’s Office of Human Services, Baltimore, MD***

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The public workforce and homeless service systems, however, face a number of challenges to sharing and integrating data. For example, these systems must comply with privacy rules and may have restrictions around sharing personally identifying information. Moreover, these public systems operate different information data management technology and systems, and developing interfaces to transfer data between these systems can be time-consuming, technically challenging, and costly.

Taken together, interviews conducted for this paper revealed that data collection, consent, sharing, and integration challenges can undermine effective systems collaboration work—or efforts to get this work underway in communities.

### **Is Employment Possible? And Whose Job is it Anyway?: Limited Buy In Among Cross-System Stakeholders Undermines Collaboration Efforts**

Successful systems collaboration efforts require buy in from frontline staff, managers, and other key decision makers across systems that they can—and should—work together to address the unmet needs or interests of their shared constituency.

Although some stakeholders in the public workforce and homeless service systems may understand that employment success and housing stability are linked, in many communities there is still not a collaborative systems-level response aimed at advancing employment and economic opportunity for homeless or unstably housed jobseekers.

The above-described challenges of limited resources, lack of accountability, and insufficient data certainly contribute to this inaction. However, experts interviewed for this paper identify “culture issues” as another challenge that stymies public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration. This challenge manifests as an uncertainty among staff in both systems that 1) people experiencing homelessness need to, want, and can work and 2) that their system plays a key role in helping to make that happen.<sup>iii</sup>

With regard to the public workforce system, common concerns are that managers and frontline staff may have preconceptions about whether the majority of people experiencing homelessness are “ready,” willing, or able to enter and succeed in the workforce. As a result of misinformation or limited experience working with this diverse population, public workforce staff may assume incorrectly that all people experiencing homelessness are unsheltered, experience co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, and/or lack any skills or work experience. These stakeholders may also question whether it’s “their job” to develop specialized knowledge about workforce development strategies for homeless jobseekers in order to deliver effective employment services to this population.

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**“Culture issues” that undermine public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration often manifest as an uncertainty among staff in both systems that 1) people experiencing homelessness need to, want, and can work and 2) that their system plays a key role in helping to make that happen.**

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On the homeless service side, managers and frontline staff may not be fully persuaded that:

- employment is a critical component of helping clients exit homelessness;
- their clients are employable in the near term;
- employment supports—rather than threatens—the stability and recovery of their clients; and
- their jobs include facilitating access to and success in employment.

Not all workforce development and homeless service professionals question whether people experiencing homelessness need to, want to, and can work, nor do all of these professionals question that their system plays a role in advancing employment and economic opportunity for these jobseekers. However, interviews conducted for this paper suggest that these are pervasive uncertainties that act as significant barriers to initiating and facilitating systems collaboration efforts.

## **People Experiencing Homelessness Need To, Want To, and Can Work**

***Time and again, research shows that people experiencing homelessness need and want to work. People experiencing homelessness consistently rank employment along with healthcare and housing as a primary need and often attribute their homelessness to unemployment and insufficient income. When parents of families experiencing homelessness are asked to name one thing that would most help get their family back on its feet, the most common answer is employment, and heads of households experiencing homelessness overwhelmingly opt into employment services when available. When given the right opportunities, tools, and supports, people experiencing homelessness can be successful in employment.***

iii. Again, neither the public workforce system nor homeless service system has clear incentives to meet the employment needs and interests of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers. This lack of incentives undoubtedly contributes to, and reinforces, uncertainty as to which system “owns” this work.



# IV. Strategies for Improving Local Public Workforce and Homeless Service Systems Collaboration

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This section draws from the insights of public workforce and homeless service systems stakeholders to lift up promising strategies and approaches for improving collaboration between these two systems in communities.

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## **“Baking In” Collaboration: Support Collaborative Processes by Sharing Systems Governance**

Shared systems governance can help address the barriers to public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration described in the previous section. Shared governance “bakes” collaborative processes into public systems work and, by doing so, facilitates the other strategies for enhancing public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration discussed in this section.

The public workforce and homeless service systems have a number of different opportunities for sharing systems governance.

On the public workforce side, local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) can appoint governmental entities who represent housing programs to the board, such as Continuum of Care (CoC) leadership. A local WDB can also include representatives of community-based organizations with experience and expertise serving jobseekers facing barriers to employment on its board. As a result, CoC members—or CoC leaders—that offer employment services to homeless and unstably housed individuals are also potential decision makers on local WDBs.

*“When we formed the governing board of our CoC, we put a lot of intentionality into having the Executive Director of our local WDB appointed to the CoC Board. In addition to facilitating cross-system communication and relationships, we wanted to make sure that the local WDB was formally tied into CoC governance and leadership because employment matters when it comes to ending homelessness. We also have a CoC-funded agency participating on the local WDB, and look for opportunities to coordinate with CoC-funded agencies in the community, to help ensure the prioritization of families and individuals experiencing homelessness.”*

*– Jennifer Chang, Portland Housing Bureau, Portland, OR*

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***Because their inclusion on local WDBs is optional, governmental entities representing housing programs and organizations serving jobseekers facing barriers may need to approach local public workforce system leaders and ask to be part of their leadership bodies.***

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CoC leaders or CoC members on the local WDB can bring important perspectives to workforce development planning and implementation, such as knowledge about the employment interests and needs of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers, what workforce services these jobseekers are already accessing, and service gaps. On the homeless service side, the CoC Program gives CoCs a high degree of local flexibility as it relates to CoC membership and the composition of the CoC Board, committees, and workgroups. Representatives of the WIOA system can be CoC members, and local WDB leadership can serve on the CoC Board or on committees and workgroups. By doing so, public workforce stakeholders can play a role in guiding and supporting the local response to homelessness, which can have positive ripple effects for employers and businesses.

### **Bring on the Carrots & the Sticks: Dedicate Resources and Increase Accountability Within Both Systems**

As discussed, few dedicated resources coupled with a lack of clear, consistent accountability mechanisms often delays or severely limits systems collaboration efforts intended to increase employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers. For the public workforce and homeless service systems to collaborate effectively, local WDB and CoC leaders must address these fundamental issues within their systems.

## ***Chicago's CoC Employment Task Force Partners with the Local WDB to Advance Employment & Economic Opportunity for People Experiencing Homelessness***

In 2012, the City of Chicago launched its second plan to end homelessness, Plan 2.0. To advance the plan's strategic priority to increase employment opportunities for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the CoC created an Employment Task Force. The Employment Task Force collaborates with a number of stakeholders—including Chicago's local Workforce Development Board (WDB), the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership—to advance its goals, which include doubling the percentage of people who become employed while engaged in the homeless service system and who exit the system with increased employment income.

The Employment Task Force's collaboration with the local WDB is still in its early stages. The local WDB's Director of Strategic Initiatives and Policy recently joined the Task Force, and is working with fellow members on a project to leverage public workforce and homeless service data to understand cross-system co-enrollment in order to better align Chicago's housing and workforce development models and interventions. The Employment Task Force also provided the local WDB with recommendations to ensure Chicago's local WIOA plan supports the employment interests and needs of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers and has established cross-training opportunities for frontline staff in both systems to learn about each other's work and areas for collaboration.

The CoC's Employment Task Force is an important point of connectivity between the public workforce and homeless service systems and will seek to deepen its relationship with the local WDB as the CoC continues to implement Chicago's Plan 2.0.

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***Local WDB leaders can prioritize youth and adults experiencing homelessness and housing instability for career and training services by naming these populations as priorities within their local WIOA strategic plans.***

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For the public workforce system, the local Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) planning process contains an important set of policy levers—such as funding and performance measures—that can increase incentives to serve the employment needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Specifically, local WDB leaders can prioritize youth and adults experiencing homelessness and housing instability for career and training services by naming these populations as priorities within their local WIOA strategic plans.

In order to ensure that prioritizing homeless and unstably housed jobseekers under WIOA translates into a greater share of these jobseekers being served, workforce leaders need to couple prioritization with dedicated and consistent resources through WIOA funds or other local, state, or federal resources under the workforce system’s jurisdiction. One way to do this is to have governors leverage their WIOA discretionary funds toward developing and implementing innovative workforce development strategies and program models aimed at meeting the employment needs and interests of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

In addition, WDB leaders responsible for developing and negotiating performance measures can and should negotiate WIOA performance outcome indicators that align with the characteristics and needs of jobseekers experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Doing so can create incentives to serve these workers because, ideally, these indicators would be calibrated to take into account a range of factors that promote or create barriers to achieving WIOA performance metrics, including: employment placement success, earnings gains over time, and measurable skills gains, among others.

Within the homeless service system, a key way to increase the incentive for providers to take into account the employment interests and needs of people experiencing homelessness is through the annual Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) process. Specifically, CoCs can choose to prioritize local projects for CoC Program funding that include an employment component or that have demonstrated partnerships with workforce, education, or training services. Doing so has the potential to incentivize a greater number of local homeless service providers to develop responses to addressing homelessness

### ***Hennepin County’s WIOA Targets Align with the Characteristics and Needs of Youth Experiencing Homelessness***

In Hennepin County, MN, the City of Minneapolis WDB has developed WIOA youth performance targets and indicators with the guidance of local CoC leaders and providers serving youth experiencing homelessness. The expertise of local homeless system providers has helped to ensure that WIOA performance indicators reflect the realities of helping homeless and unstably housed youth succeed in employment, education, and training programs.

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***CoC system performance is also based, in part, on how long people remain homeless and the extent to which people who have exited homelessness return to homelessness. Arguably, these system performance outcomes are affected by whether or not people succeed in work. CoCs that prioritize funding for homeless service programs that include employment, training, and education may also improve their performance on these measures.***

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that include access to employment, education, and training for their participants.

In addition, CoCs that prioritize funding for local projects that include employment-related elements are aligning with the HEARTH Act's legislative mandate to measure CoC system performance based, in part, on employment and income growth among people experiencing homelessness—and, over time, to award HUD funding to CoCs accordingly.<sup>11</sup> By prioritizing funding to local homeless service programs with employment, training, and education components now or in the near term, CoCs can learn what does (and doesn't) work to advance employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers and position themselves competitively for future performance-based HUD funding.

### ***Philanthropy and Community-Based Organizations Can Nudge Systems Toward Collaboration***

The interviews conducted for this paper showed that most communities engaged in public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration work leverage dedicated flexible funding to support their efforts—and would need more dedicated funding for future systems collaboration work. In communities where there is little political will to direct public revenue toward supporting systems collaboration, philanthropy can be source of flexible funding to spark initial collaborative efforts and innovation and give stakeholders an opportunity to leverage their successes toward more sustainable public dollars.

Moreover, community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide employment and other supportive services to homeless and unstably housed jobseekers also can and should nudge these two systems toward collaboration. Drawing from their on-the-ground experience, these CBOs can advance local conversations and efforts to ensure that the public workforce system accounts for the needs and interests of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

In particular, these CBOs should 1) get organized and aligned; 2) inform themselves about the local process for developing WIOA plans and how to influence the system; and 3) speak with a collective voice about why and how the public workforce system can work with the homeless service system to advance economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers. Our *WIOA Planning & Implementation Toolkit* has ideas to help stakeholders get started.

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***This community asset mapping resource can help guide public workforce and homeless service systems stakeholders in collecting data to assess 1) the needs of jobseekers facing barriers to employment and 2) the availability and capacity of employment services and supports for these jobseekers. With this information in hand, stakeholders can better identify systems collaboration.***

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## **Asking the Questions & Getting on the Same Page: Collect, Share, and Integrate Data to Advance Collaboration Across Systems**

Having the public workforce and homeless service system collect, share, and integrate data related to the housing, employment, and income needs of the people they serve is essential to collaborative work between these two systems.

As discussed, the WIOA system is required to collect information about the housing status of the individuals it serves but does not always do so effectively. To support the collection of these data, local WDBs can provide technical assistance efforts aimed at 1) building the capacity of local data management systems to include questions about, record, and report jobseekers' housing status and 2) educating WIOA providers and intake specialists about why and how to collect these data. In particular, WIOA providers and intake specialists may need training on WIOA's expanded definition of housing status, which is more comprehensive than the definition under previous legislation.

As also discussed, CoCs are required to gather data related to employment and income growth among adults in CoC Program-funded housing interventions. These data are used to assess CoC system performance. Similar to steps local WDBs can take, CoCs can support the collection of these data by providing technical assistance that 1) builds the capacity of its Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to ask questions about, record, and report individuals' employment and income-related information and 2) equips the community's homeless service providers to gather these data.

CoCs also have many other opportunities to collect information related to advancing employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed individuals. For example, the CoC is responsible for conducting an annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count of people experiencing homelessness within its jurisdiction.<sup>iv</sup> This is a prime opportunity for CoCs to gather data systematically about the employment needs, interests, and activities of people experiencing homelessness.

***This infographic shows how communities across the country are using their Point-In-Time counts to gather information about the employment interests and activities of people experiencing homelessness as well as how communities are using these data.***

iv. HUD requires that CoCs conduct an annual count of homeless persons who are sheltered on a single night. CoCs also must conduct a count of unsheltered homeless persons every other year. More information can be found [here](#).

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***“Our CoC and local WDB created a data sharing agreement between our HMIS and WIOA data systems. Through HMIS, we can refer homeless jobseekers to WIOA services. WIOA providers can access HMIS and are required to update the system about a person’s employment activities and outcomes. Major early successes of sharing data across these systems are being able to quickly refer people coming through coordinated entry to employment pathways, being able to provide cross-system case conferencing, and reduced duplication of data entry.”***

***– Chad Bojorquez,  
Destination: Home,  
Santa Clara County,  
CA***

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CoCs can also design and implement “enhanced” coordinated entry systems that collect and assess information about the housing, employment, and income needs of people entering the homeless service system in order to support these individuals in having both a housing and income plan.

Once data are collected, the public workforce and homeless service systems must share or integrate their findings to inform collaborative, data-driven decision making related to meeting the employment and housing needs and interests of their overlapping service population. Although interviews conducted for this paper did not reveal communities with public workforce and homeless service systems that fully coordinate and align their data collection and analysis, local WDB and CoC leadership can create data sharing agreements that allow for information exchange while respecting privacy concerns.

### ***Baltimore’s Cross-System Data Integration Informs Program and Policy Approaches to Advance Economic Opportunity for People Experiencing Homelessness***

In Baltimore, MD, the Mayor’s Office worked with the CoC and a local legal services provider to join data on people involved in the homeless service system to data on people in the criminal justice system.

These stakeholders developed and implemented various measures to protect privacy concerns, including a protocol for destroying sensitive information.

Integrating data across these systems revealed that 43 percent of individuals receiving services through Baltimore’s homeless service system have at least one expungable criminal record—a barrier to both employment and housing that can be addressed through program-level and policy efforts to expand access to expungement services and reduce the overreach of the criminal justice system.

Data integration projects between the public workforce and homeless service systems will likely reveal other policy and program-level opportunities for improving access to employment and economic opportunity for jobseekers experiencing homelessness.

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***Cross-training is one strategy for mitigating the “culture issues” that exist between the public workforce and homeless service systems and an opportunity to identify avenues for deeper systems collaboration.***

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## **Changing Hearts & Minds: Engage Stakeholders in Cross-Training to Build Buy In for Systems Collaboration**

To generate buy in from public workforce and homeless service systems stakeholders that they can and should work together to advance employment and economic opportunity for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers, it’s essential to mitigate the above-described “culture issues” that exist between these two systems.

Cross-training that engages frontline staff and leadership from across systems is one strategy for doing so.

Cross-training gives workforce development and homeless service professionals opportunities to come together to learn about each system’s structure, language, service offerings, best practices and evidence-based service models, and policy and funding frameworks.

Beyond these basics, cross-training is a chance for systems stakeholders to understand that they serve the same population, learn about how housing and employment success are interrelated, break down commonly-held misperceptions that people experiencing homelessness don’t want to or are unable to work, and begin to identify avenues for deeper systems collaboration.

In communities where there is limited expressed interest from public systems leaders about collaborating across public workforce and homeless service systems, philanthropy or advocacy groups can play an important role in initiating and generating interest in cross-training efforts. In other communities, systems leaders who recognize that collaboration is essential to meeting their respective housing and employment-related goals can take the lead in launching cross-training strategies.

## ***Houston’s “Income Now” Cross-Training Series Equips Public Workforce and Homeless Service Stakeholders to Advance Economic Opportunity for Homeless Jobseekers***

In Houston, advocates and leaders from the local WDB and the city’s CoC developed and implemented a ten-part cross-training workshop series designed to equip service providers and program managers from both the public workforce and homeless service systems with best practices and tools to increase employment and economic opportunity for homeless jobseekers.

The series also aimed to shift public system staff perceptions about the ability of people experiencing homelessness to succeed in employment.

Outcomes data from the workshop series show a 10 percent increase among participants who agree that people experiencing homelessness can be successfully employed. There was also a 19 percent increase among participants who agreed they felt equipped with strategies to help homeless individuals work on employment goals.

# Conclusion

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The public workforce system and the homeless service system have interrelated goals for their participants: employment success and housing stability, respectively. Although these goals are closely connected, neither system on its own has the resources, capacity, or expertise to ensure that all homeless and unstably housed jobseekers can succeed in work and stabilize in housing. These two systems must collaborate to accomplish their goals and best meet the economic opportunity and housing needs and interests of their participants.

That said, systems collaboration is tough work. It requires a change in the status quo and a willingness among systems stakeholders to share risks and responsibilities. Although the public workforce and homeless service systems face a number of barriers to collaboration, solutions and different approaches do exist. In communities, local Workforce Development Boards and Continuums of Care can—and do—make choices around shared governance, dedicated resources, accountability mechanisms, data collection and sharing, and cross-training that can enhance collaboration between these systems. When communities make an intentional commitment to public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration, it is possible to move the dial and see a greater share of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers succeed in work and stabilize in housing.

Public systems are better at solving big problems when they work together. By working together to tackle barriers to employment and housing, collaboration between the public workforce and homeless service systems can play a critical role in ending chronic unemployment, poverty, and homelessness.

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# MOVING TOWARD PUBLIC WORKFORCE & HOMELESS SERVICE SYSTEMS COLLABORATION:

## Steps Service Providers & Other Stakeholders Can Take in the Near Term

Systems collaboration efforts exist at different scales and along a continuum that evolves over time. Within a community, collaborative efforts among public systems—efforts that may “trickle up” to yield state or federal policy change—often begin on the program level among the community’s existing service providers.

A first step along the systems collaboration continuum may be cross-system **networking**, in which stakeholders from different systems informally exchange mutually beneficial information. As collaboration grows deeper and more intentional, stakeholders may seek to **coordinate** across systems by changing their own activities—such as when and what type of services their organizations provide—to reduce barriers to access or duplication of services. As collaboration continues to evolve and trust deepens, cross-system stakeholders may **cooperate** to share resources such as knowledge, staff, space, and reputation.

Interviews conducted for this paper showed that public workforce and homeless service stakeholders, including frontline staff, have come up with a range of approaches that nudge their communities toward deeper systems collaboration. These approaches are lighter-touch strategies that direct service providers and other stakeholders seeking to spur collaboration between the public workforce and homeless service systems can implement in the nearer term.

### #1: HAVE A DEDICATED STAFF PERSON WITH CROSS-SYSTEM EXPERTISE & RELATIONSHIPS

As a first step toward systems collaboration work—and one that will begin to improve access to each other’s services—public workforce and homeless service providers can **have a dedicated point-person on staff** who becomes well-versed in the other system’s service offerings, available resources, and service delivery locations as well as the barriers to employment and housing faced by homeless and unstably housed jobseekers. This point person should also foster cross-system relationships and information exchanges that can benefit homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.



For example, a point person on the workforce side could make sure that local homeless service providers are aware of specialized or intensive workforce development programming available for jobseekers facing barriers to employment. On the homeless service side, [Employment Navigators](#)<sup>i</sup> can help jobseekers experiencing homelessness navigate multiple systems to access the services necessary to become both employed and stably housed.

On an organizational level, it is important to put knowledge management mechanisms in place to ensure that cross-system knowledge is shared with other staff and documented over time, so that turnover does not significantly disrupt the flow of information or result in expertise being lost.



## #2: ENGAGE IN CROSS-SYSTEM CASE CONFERENCING

As a next step in collaborative work that involves greater trust and aligning of staff activities across systems, public workforce and homeless service providers can **engage in cross-system case conferencing for dual-system participants**. Formalizing cross-system case conferencing processes through a Memorandum of Understanding can clarify expectations and roles and embed the practice into both systems.

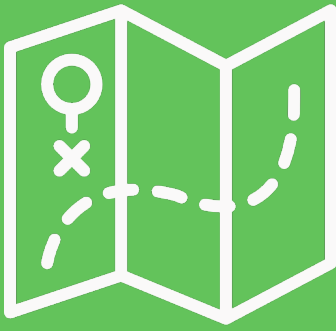
Cross-system case conferencing could include, for example, having public workforce and homeless service program providers staffed at different organizations work together with a dual-system participant to create a service plan that aligns employment and housing goals. This type of coordinated work approach is likely to support an individual's employment retention and housing stability. Moreover, because cross-system case conferencing requires intentional and consistent communication and information sharing, this process can support—and reveal the need for—more robust collaboration.

Cross-system case conferencing gives staff the opportunity to teach each other the language and accountability measure of their respective systems, leverage each other's resources, and reduce redundancy of services. At the same time, cross-system case conferencing can also illuminate service delivery gaps and areas where further alignment and collaboration is necessary.

***“If someone seeking services through our America’s Job Center of California locations identifies as experiencing homelessness, we have a case manager dedicated to serving that population. The jobseeker will be sent to our case manager, who is a subject matter expert and has connections to other supports that the jobseeker may need.”***

***– David Mirrione, work2future Foundation (formerly), San Jose, CA***

i. More information about the Employment Navigator model can be found [here](#).



### #3: CO-LOCATE STAFF AND SERVICES

Representing a deeper level of collaboration that requires sharing space and its associated resources, **public workforce and homeless service providers can co-locate staff and services.**

For example, an American Job Center can also serve as a space where homeless service staff can conduct intakes into the homeless service system. In this way, co-location increases access to services for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers by cutting down on their travel time, especially in communities with limited public transportation options.

Co-location also facilitates real-time information sharing among staff, allowing staff to better align the activities of their respective systems and leverage existing resources on behalf of homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

Finally, by having cross-system staff work together in a shared environment as colleagues, co-location promotes cross-system learning and opportunities for collective innovation that may lead to better service delivery approaches for homeless and unstably housed jobseekers.

#### ***Multnomah County's Economic Opportunity Program Uses Cross-System Case Conferencing to Align Homeless Jobseekers' Employment & Housing Goals***

In Multnomah County, OR, the Economic Opportunity Program (EOP)—which is coordinated and managed by the Workforce Development Board and includes a number of local homeless service providers—is an employment program which offers rental assistance to jobseekers experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

Career Coaches on the workforce development side and Rent Assistance Coordinators on the homeless service side engage in cross-system case conferencing to ensure that these jobseekers' employment and housing goals align. Cross-system staff communicate throughout the time that an EOP participant receives rental assistance and work together to ensure EOP participants can maintain their own housing when the rental assistance ends.

A recent evaluation of EOP found that 76 percent of participants retained housing 12 months after their rental assistance ended.

More information can be found about EOP [here](#).

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33 W. Grand Avenue, Suite 500, Chicago, IL 60654 | 312.870.4949 | [ni@heartlandalliance.org](mailto:ni@heartlandalliance.org)  
[www.heartlandalliance.org/nationalinitiatives](http://www.heartlandalliance.org/nationalinitiatives) | [@NIheartland](https://twitter.com/NIheartland) | <http://bit.ly/NIFacebook>



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