



CoC Pathway of Systems Change: A Reflective Evaluation

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Report Information

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All Chicago would like to thank the 23 individuals who volunteered their time and contributed their insights to make this report possible. See [Appendix A](#) for more information.

About All Chicago:

All Chicago prevents and ends homelessness through emergency financial assistance, community partnerships, data analytics, training, and research. Learn more at allchicago.org.

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Chicago has dramatically changed how it approaches preventing and ending homelessness, embracing the principle of housing first, and shifting to an increasingly coordinated and integrated service provider network. The *Getting Housed, Staying Housed* plan in 2002, and its 2012 update *Chicago's Plan 2.0: A Home for Everyone*, describes the movement toward these changes. Evaluation reports and other available documents about implementation provide insights into their impact. Some of these impacts include that all major service providers now share data through the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS), thousands of new permanent supportive housing units have come online, new homelessness prevention and rental resources are available, and innovative projects have been developed such as those targeting assistance for homeless veterans and youth. The work of preventing and ending homelessness continues as outlined in the Continuum of Care's (CoC) *Action Agenda*, led by All Chicago, as the backbone agency for its implementation.

The following report summarizes the views and perspectives of leaders in the City of Chicago's homelessness prevention and care system on how the system has changed over time¹, successes and challenges experienced as these changes occurred, and current system priorities and needs. The report begins with an overview of [The Action Agenda](#), highlighting its origins and interviewee perspectives on the results it is driving. It continues with perspectives on CoC challenges, including [Communications, CoC Board Development and Management, and Coordinated Entry](#). The [Public Policy and Civic Infrastructure](#) context for ending homelessness in Chicago is also discussed. The views and perspectives included in this report were collected from interviews conducted in person and via phone with CoC board members and committee leaders, All Chicago staff and board members, service providers, funders, and the Lived Experience Commission².

THE ACTION AGENDA

Most interviewees are supportive of the Action Agenda framework, while also holding strong views that the framework is still a work-in-progress with specific and important challenges that need to be addressed. This was a consensus viewpoint. Most interviewees support data-driven strategies, working in coordinated and collaborative ways, and involving system-level power brokers – all important concepts that drive the Action Agenda.

The Action Agenda originates from a framework developed and used for Chicago's Ending Veterans Homelessness Initiative (EVHI). EVHI was managed using a systems framework that included a coordinated process for Veterans to access housing and services; service providers cooperating and collectively identifying challenges and solutions; and data-driven decision making enabled by all partners entering data into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)³. The systems framework used by EVHI was applied broadly to the work of the CoC and launched as the Action Agenda⁴.

Interviewees broadly see EVHI as an initiative that was effective in helping homeless veterans. Interviewees were also enthused about the progress being made with housing homeless youth, and

¹ The interviews primarily explored changes since 2011, although some changes from previous years were noted by interviewees with long experience working on homelessness in Chicago.

² [Appendix A](#) to this report has additional detail about this project's framework, the consultants that produced this report, as well as more detail about who was interviewed.

³ For more information on EVHI, see "[Understanding the Success of Chicago's Ending Veteran Homelessness Initiative](#)." All Chicago. June 2018.

⁴ For more information on the origin of these changes, see "[Chicago Strategy Memo](#)." Corporation for Supportive Housing. June 2017; and see The Action Agenda's "[12 Lines of Work](#)." All Chicago. Updated May 2019.

several interviewees attributed this progress to the new Action Agenda approach. Several interviewees also noted this has the potential to be a success that mirrors the success of EVHI.

Interviewees discussed examples of how the system is more coordinated and collaborative under the Action Agenda. They noted that it is normal for service providers to be aware of each other's work, and to think about connections across lines of work. Others identified that service providers have modified their approach from focusing primarily on program delivery to include coordination with others as a way to achieve the system's larger goals. These are changes that started before the Action Agenda, and that interviewees noted have advanced under the Action Agenda.

Interviewees also made a connection that collaboration and coordination are enabled by advances with data – with HMIS and with the support and training All Chicago provides through working with HMIS. There is a universal understanding that data is essential to the system's work now, and most interviewees understand and value the dashboard.⁵

Most interviewees expect and still hope to see the success of EVHI replicated at greater scale for Chicago through implementation of the Action Agenda. Change at this scale brings challenges, and subsequent sections of this report explore the most common challenges cited by interview respondents – communications and CoC board development and management.

COMMUNICATIONS

“Consensus-building and communication – this is what we have to do.”

As the structure of the CoC has evolved in recent years, the necessity for better and more systematic communications has become increasingly apparent. Interviewees noted improvement. Periodic email updates from All Chicago provide timely information. All Chicago's efforts to improve dissemination of HMIS data has given partner agencies unprecedented information upon which to base policy and program decisions. Yet, effective communication remains a significant challenge both internally and externally in implementing the Action Agenda.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

With the CoC's new committee structure, interviewees noted that committees are more empowered to take independent action and implement new ideas. All Chicago is charged with ensuring that these actions, once taken, are communicated broadly; however, some interviewees noted that they are frequently unaware of decisions made or actions taken by the different CoC committees. With the expectation of coordination and collaboration across committees, this gap in communications is a challenge. No formal method appears to be in place to ensure information is shared across the CoC's committee structure, leaving some committees unaware of information that may affect their own work.

Several participants also indicated that decisions or interpretations of regulations by All Chicago were communicated, but without sufficient explanation about why those rulings were made. To some, this creates the sense that All Chicago is not being transparent.

⁵ Chicago's Dashboard to End Homelessness harnesses data from HMIS to transparently depict how people experiencing homelessness access services and move to housing. The dashboard is updated at least weekly with the data entered in HMIS by over 1,000 direct users.

Other interviewees reported that the information flow is good, but that it sometimes is overwhelming. They suggested that communications be targeted more specifically to executives, program, and line staff, so that it becomes easier to highlight the most relevant information to each group.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Interviewees agreed that great progress has been made in the fight to end homelessness and that there are several notable success stories. They also agree that the successes are not widely known outside of the CoC. The EVHI resulted in concrete improvements in people's lives. It provided an example of how the CoC can be deployed effectively to implement the Action Agenda framework. And, it demonstrated that deliberate, intentional work, fueled by political will and data, can achieve results. Yet, it will be an isolated success if the story is not widely told and the lessons learned are not disseminated to an audience beyond the CoC. Similarly, many interviewees see progress around current efforts to address youth homelessness. Collaboration and coordination within the system are beginning to show positive results. Communicating these results broadens their impact raising awareness with new and important stakeholders.

Interviewees noted that it is important to share these effective strategies, as well as those that have not been as productive. Discussing challenges such as implementation of Coordinated Entry (CE), or making progress on creating more housing options, are also essential to strong external communications.

A communications strategy that systematically and repeatedly highlights case studies, stories, and data can serve as a tool to engage key public, private, and nonprofit leaders as well as to advance education and policy goals. Shared narratives about successes and experiences with systems change also serve as organizing tools that support the collaboration and coordination goals of the system.

SUGGESTIONS OFFERED BY INTERVIEWEES

- Develop a comprehensive communications strategy that incorporates both internal and external communications and designate staff with primary responsibility for implementation.
- Engage in a strategy to deliver messaging about the Action Agenda to new, different, and important tables, such as funders and policy makers at all levels of government.
- Establish a regular reporting mechanism so that all committee members, executives, program, and line staff can be informed about decisions made by the CoC board or by other committees, allowing them to “opt-in” to various updates and levels of communication.
- Create a “story bank” that can be used to inform and educate public officials, funders, policy makers, and others about the work of the CoC.
- Draft a set of “talking points” to help CoC members spread the messaging about the Action Agenda and give them an effective and succinct set of tools they can use to talk about issues to their constituencies.
- Reformat and update the website so that it is easier to use, and so that it supports the important internal and external communications functions of the CoC.

CoC BOARD DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

“Everyone needs to feel that they are engaged.”

In recent years, the CoC board and management have been realigned in parallel with implementation of the Action Agenda. Changes were made to engage power brokers such as the Mayor’s office, City commissioners, and other private and philanthropic representatives. While progress has been made, several interviewees noted that it has led to unforeseen challenges. Power brokers were recruited to the CoC board based on the important role they had in EVHI. However, interviewees reported that some of the newly recruited CoC board members do not attend meetings, and they do not understand what value these new board members are bringing to the CoC’s work. Most feel that more effort should be addressed toward engaging the CoC board and involving key agencies and partners, so that the organization can develop more resources and greater power to meet its goals.

The Action Agenda has also reorganized the CoC’s committee structure into 12 lines of work. Some interviewees view this new structure as positive and directly attribute progress and success to the new structure. Others noted feeling disconnected or “out of the loop” in the new committee structure. One interviewee representing this viewpoint expressed this by noting that “service providers were an integral part of the discussions about making the system better, but now they are not and that’s really too bad; There is a disconnect that needs to be addressed...service providers want to be a part of an integrated system.”

The hiring of a new Executive Director offers the opportunity to build relationships with CoC board members and encourage their engagement. Early and regular individual meetings between the executive director and each CoC board member can show respect, inform the onboarding process for the new director, and surface issues that need attention. In the initial year, it was suggested by interviewees that the new director should prioritize managing the CoC board, clarifying its roles and responsibilities, and focusing it on its appropriate role of setting and monitoring policy, rather than on operations. A CoC board and committee outreach strategy, along with an expanded communications strategy, will help involve participants who otherwise may feel disconnected. It is also typical for a system operating at this scale to invest in dedicated staff (such as a Director of Board Development) at the leadership level that dedicates capacity to managing the CoC board.

SUGGESTIONS OFFERED BY INTERVIEWEES

Develop a plan for continuing to learn, reform, and improve – to become a learning organization that communicates well, adjusts readily to change, builds trust with its directors and partners, and is seen as a unifier and consensus builder. Starting points for this include:

- Encouraging the new CEO to meet individually with representatives of the CoC Board to build relationships, communicate priorities, and listen to the thoughts, opinions, and perceptions of members.
- Reaching out to key public, private, and philanthropic leaders to more actively engage them in CoC board activities and decision-making.
- Assigning a dedicated staff person to manage CoC board relations, communicate ongoing issues, and facilitate greater involvement.

- Working to resolve the tension that exists with service providers that support the Action Agenda, but find their voice diminished in the new structure. Work to ensure they feel engaged as key stakeholders.

COORDINATED ENTRY (CE)

“Coordinated Entry helped us realize that we cannot solve for homelessness by ourselves.”

Interviewees varied in their perspectives about Coordinated Entry (CE). Some interviewees identified this as an important process that ensures the most vulnerable are connected with housing. They also noted that CE is an essential tool that enables organizations to coordinate their efforts strategically to achieve system goals.

Some interviewees expressed concerns with the implementation of CE. These include:

- Apartments remain vacant for months at a time while waiting for tenants referred through CE. This is disruptive to funding streams tied to these units and can damage relationships with landlords.
- Service providers with specialized services/housing are selecting clients from the One List that do not need the specialized services they offer. Some service providers are not prepared to work with highly vulnerable people from the One List that are placed with them.
- Some service providers that intake homeless clients are not putting client data into the CE system. Some intake data is also incomplete; HUD requires service providers to have documentation that a client is homeless in order to house them. Absent this documentation, vulnerable people face another barrier to getting housed.

SUGGESTIONS OFFERED BY INTERVIEWEES

- Directly engage service providers in defining the problem and developing solutions.
- Provide training and improve processes for data entry with organizations that conduct intake with clients.
- Consult available documentation on best practices and experiences with CE in the field to identify potential improvements/enhancements.
- Investigate how to streamline the system so that the time it takes to place people in available units is reduced substantially.
- Consider allowing service providers to set aside some percentage of their available housing for clients not at the top of the One List.

PUBLIC POLICY AND CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

“Homelessness is tied to how a city functions and its own strengths and weaknesses – policies related to equity, justice, affordable housing, health.”

Interviewees universally identified the lack of affordable housing as the most pressing challenge facing the homelessness system. Interviewees observed that without a viable housing strategy, homelessness cannot be ended, and the best the system can achieve is becoming better and more efficient at moving people through the system.

Interviewees acknowledge progress being made through the work of the Pipeline Committee, while suggesting that city/county departments regularly need to be at the table in conversation about how they can contribute to ending homelessness. Interviewees noted specifically that the Departments of Planning and Development and of Housing need to have ending homelessness as a priority they are accountable for achieving.

Interviewees broadly viewed the City of Chicago as an essential partner in ending homelessness. Interviewees noted that Mayoral support for the homelessness system is essential. It drives prioritization (such as for housing strategies and identifying dedicated funding). Mayoral appointments to key positions matter too, with many interviewees noting that departmental leadership that values collaboration with the homelessness system is essential to its success.

Most interviewees were enthusiastic about the Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS). Specifically, interviewees noted that DFSS is at the table with the CoC and All Chicago, intentionally collaborating and coordinating its resources to align with CoC goals. Many interviewees were also enthusiastic about specific DFSS leaders, including the Commissioner. Several interviewees also noted that the Chicago Housing Authority is another public entity doing more to align resources with CoC goals.

Interviewees identified the need for more funding and specifically for a dedicated revenue source to fund the homelessness system. The Airbnb tax was noted as a step in the right direction in some interviews, and many pointed to the Bring Chicago Home Campaign as the next step that is needed.

Many interviewees also discussed the emergence of partnerships across sectors as being an important development. Connecting with corrections, schools, foster homes, health, and juvenile services systems is viewed as having the potential to generate improved outcomes for ending homelessness. Local funders are investing in supporting some of these initial connections, including through the Funders Together to End Homelessness Group.

SUGGESTIONS OFFERED BY INTERVIEWEES

- Brief the new mayor about the City and the CoC plan for ending homelessness, reinforcing the importance of the Mayor's Office in advocating for and allocating the resources needed to implement the plan.
- Ask the Mayor to appoint Commissioners to key departments (DFSS, DPD) who value collaboration and are willing to work in an integrated way with the CoC and direct them to participate actively.
- Build stronger connections with the advocacy community and work together to advocate for key priorities.

CONCLUSION

The pace of change and the progress made toward ending homelessness in Chicago is as remarkable as the challenges that remain to achieving this goal. Initiatives with homeless veterans and youth are demonstrating results, and the system is more data driven and collaborative than at any point in its past. Yet, more work is needed to improve how the CoC works together to leverage these successes to achieve bigger gains. Building the housing pipeline that is critical to ending homelessness requires new

resources and relationships – and that will be difficult to accomplish regardless of these improvements. Better communications tools and systems, and investments in improving CoC board relationships are critical to building a strong platform the CoC can use to make further leaps towards ending homelessness. Also critical to strengthening the CoC is improving engagement and coordination with service providers, the lived experience community, and the public and philanthropic sectors. The opportunity moving forward is to leverage the ideas in this report, generated by interviewees, to make changes to CoC structures and processes. In support of this opportunity, Chicago has a set of stakeholders who have made substantial progress in recent years, and who are deeply committed to being a part of continuing to improve and build.

APPENDIX A: PROJECT OVERVIEW

All Chicago sponsored this reflective evaluation in order to better understand and document this path of change. This project was designed with the following objectives:

- Objective #1: To document the perspectives of stakeholders about key successes and important challenges during the process of changing how the work of preventing and ending homelessness in Chicago is governed and managed.
- Objective #2: To explore and better understand connections between changes in how the work of preventing and ending homelessness in Chicago is governed and managed, and successes in addressing homelessness such as recent declines in the Point in Time (PIT) homeless population counts.
- Objective #3: To inform planning for the future of the work of preventing and ending homelessness in Chicago, as well as to inform opportunities to influence public policy.

Findings related to Objectives #1 and #3 are the subject of this summary report. Findings related to Objective #2 are included in [Appendix D](#). These objectives were pursued through interviews with key stakeholders that are knowledgeable about homelessness in Chicago. A total of 23 individuals were interviewed for this project. Interviewees included All Chicago staff and board members (5) CoC board members and committee leaders (9), funders (3), service providers (4), and the Lived Experience Commission (2). In many cases, individuals had perspectives on different roles, such as CoC committee leaders that are also service providers. A total of 15 organizations were represented across interviewees, as listed in the following table.

All Chicago	Deborah's Place	Pierce Family Foundation
A Safe Haven	Chicago's Department of Family & Support Services	Polk Bros Foundation
AIDS Foundation of Chicago	Family Rescue	Renaissance Social Services
Catholic Charities	Heartland Human Care Services	The Boulevard of Chicago
Chicago Housing Authority	Inner Voice	Unity Parenting and Counseling

This project was designed and implemented by Jake Cowan and Joel Bookman, under contract with All Chicago. Jake Cowan is a Chicago-based independent consultant, providing technical assistance, planning and facilitation support, program design experience, and evaluation expertise to a diverse range of clients that include national and local organizations and philanthropic foundations that are engaged in place-based community development, cross-sector collaborations, youth development, arts and culture development, and criminal justice reform. He is a frequent collaborator with The Urban Institute (leading Washington, DC think tank for social and economic issues), where he was also previously employed. Joel Bookman is the President and CEO of Bookman Associates, Inc., providing consulting in community development, economic development, strategic planning, and program analysis and design. Previously, he served as Managing Director of the Institute for Comprehensive Community Development, and Director of Programs for LISC Chicago.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE

Interviews were conducted in person or via phone, depending on the availability of the interviewers and interviewees.

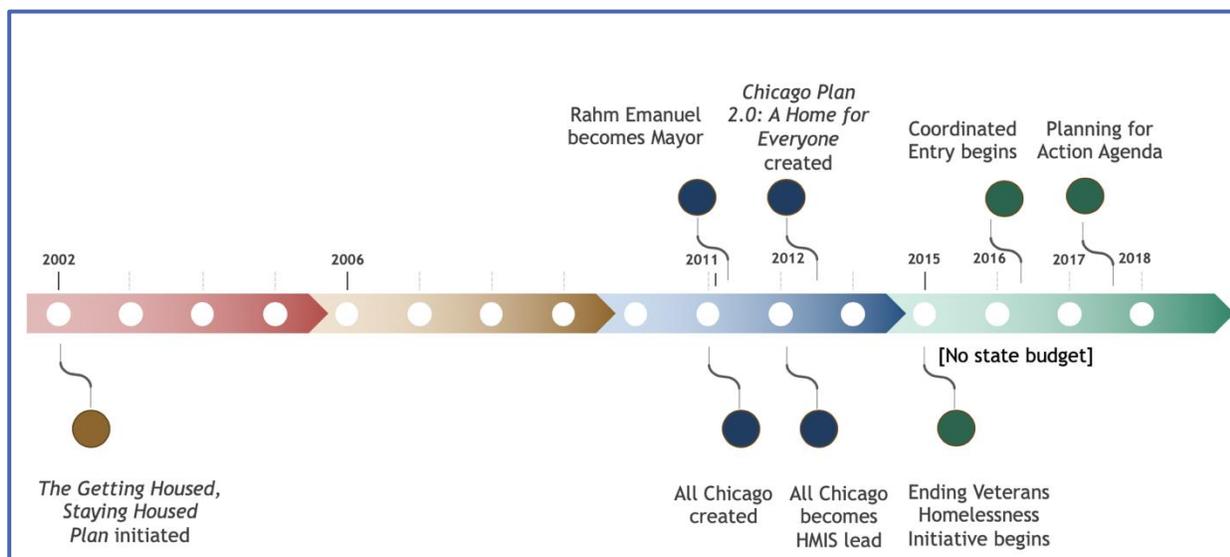
1. Please tell us about your current job duties, and your role in ending homelessness.
2. What important changes have been implemented/have occurred since you became involved with ending homelessness? When did those occur?
3. What were the key factors that enabled successful changes?
4. What challenges were experienced as these changes took place? How were these challenges overcome?
5. How would you apply what you have learned from these changes to future work to end homelessness in Chicago?
6. If you could go back and start in your role again with the knowledge you have now, what would you do differently? What should others do differently?
7. PIT Counts have decreased 20% from 2015 to 2018. What is your perspective on what important changes have influenced this decrease?
8. What are the most important challenges Chicago needs to address to end homelessness?
9. What advice would you give to Chicago's next Mayor about how to end homelessness in Chicago?
10. Are there any issues that we haven't already discussed that you would like to mention before we stop the interview?

APPENDIX C: RECOMMENDATION FOR KEY ELEMENTS TO INCLUDE ON A SYSTEMS CHANGE TIMELINE

Creating shared stories about the homelessness system is one approach that can be used to create consensus among stakeholders. If stakeholders have a common understanding of how the homelessness system has changed, they will have building blocks for finding/building consensus for their current and future work together.

As part of this project, interviewees described a number of important changes in the homelessness system. All Chicago should consider taking this initial content and further developing/expanding it, in collaboration with the CoC, in order to build a consensus about the pathway to the Action Agenda.

KEY CHANGES AND IMPORTANT EVENTS RELATED TO CHICAGO'S HOMELESSNESS SYSTEM



The following draft timeline reflects milestones discussed by interviewees:

- 2002: The Getting Housed, Staying Housed plan is initiated
- 2011: Rahm Emanuel becomes Mayor
- 2011: All Chicago is created from the merger of The Emergency Fund and The Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness
- 2012: All Chicago becomes Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) lead
- 2012: *Chicago's Plan 2.0: A Home for Everyone*, a new plan to end homelessness is initiated
- 2015: Beginning of Ending Veterans Homelessness Initiative (EVHI)
- 2016: Beginning of Coordinated Entry (CE) in Chicago
- 2015-2017: State of Illinois operates without a budget, creating hardship on service providers and partners in the homelessness system
- 2017-2018: Planning for Action Agenda culminating with the launch of a demonstration period to test out the new structure in 2018.

OTHER ELEMENTS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER ADDING TO THE TIMELINE:

The following are ideas also discussed by interviewees that need further refinement to be added to a timeline.

- **Rapid Re-housing** – Interviewees with a longer history with the system identified the shift towards rapid re-housing as a major change, and many also identified that a de-emphasis in (funding for) services is a companion impact of the change. Interviewees broadly acknowledge/support rapid re-housing as a successful strategy. Identify appropriate milestone years for these changes.
- **Homeless Prevention Call Center** – Interviewees with a longer history with the system also identified the creation of a central call center at Catholic Charities as an important change in the system to add to this timeline.
- **Policies emanating from the federal government** (legislation, HUD policy decisions) were discussed in several interviews; consider adding key milestones to the timeline.
- **All Chicago’s development and growth is also important to track** – consider adding key milestones, such as when All Chicago first received HUD funding to do training and technical assistance.

APPENDIX D: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH REVIEW WORK

As part of this scope of work, consultants reviewed a wide range of documentation about the CoC, including reports and plans leading up the Action Agenda, CoC board and committee documents, and research reports about homelessness in Chicago. Also informed by interviewees, the following are questions about homelessness in Chicago that represent potential directions for All Chicago (and the CoC) to pursue through new research projects. These are questions and ideas that are designed to generate research that supports a better understanding and tracking of systems change. Investigating these questions will help All Chicago create more shared understandings and shared narratives about homelessness in Chicago. These investigations can also help connect All Chicago and the CoC with national best practices and national researchers, which can lead to collaboration opportunities that benefit Chicago.

- Funding from HUD is a major driver of policies and practices of the homelessness system in Chicago. Aligning local priorities and needs with federal frameworks and funding rules is a principle challenge for Chicago's homelessness system. To what extent is this true in peer cities? What percentage of funding for the homelessness system in Chicago comes from HUD, and how does this compare to peer cities? What are the implications of differences, if any?
- The City of Chicago is also a major investor in Chicago's homelessness system. Does the City of Chicago spend more/less than peer cities on homelessness? This is a research question that requires careful attention to creating valid comparisons. Some interviewees expressed skepticism that the city makes homelessness a priority in its funding decisions, and investigation into this question can help inform a better understanding of how the CoC and city can partner.
- How has funding for Chicago's CoC changed over time, and what have been the drivers of changes? Factors to explore include government (federal, state, local) and philanthropic/civic funding changes. In addition, document and explore changes that come from special projects being initiated and concluding, and initiatives leveraging other funds. Documenting these changes can inform a better understanding of key successes. For example, do funding increases align with key changes such as milestones in HMIS capacity, or the adoption of the Action Agenda framework?
- Are other cities using point in time (PIT) counts as a main data point? If not, what other data are they using to tell their story? Interviewees expressed a wide range of views about point-in-time counts. Some themes from interviewees about PIT counts include:
 - Many believe that PIT counts are likely declining because of the specific work of the CoC to target the most vulnerable homeless populations.
 - PIT counts are the best we have, but they do not tell the full story of homelessness in Chicago; *"PIT counts are going down, but I still serve the same number of clients."*
 - PIT counts are not an important metric to many service providers. They doubt its accuracy and utility. Other variations of this idea expressed were: PIT counts are only an important metric to HUD or to funders; PIT counts are the marketing number.