

# UNDERSTANDING ARLINGTON'S SAFETY NET



## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

*By Liz Nohra, PathForward*

We recently sat down with Triina Van, Homeless Services Coordinator with the Arlington County Department of Human Services (DHS), to discuss our community's response to the issue of homelessness. Triina, who has been with the DHS for a little over a year, brings over 20 years of experience working in the field of homelessness prevention and housing.

Triina's passion for impacting social change and ending homelessness shone through during our interview, which helped to shed light on the array of safety net services Arlington County helps to coordinate. PathForward operates Arlington County's Homeless Services Center in the Courthouse neighborhood of Arlington. There at the HSC, PathForward houses a full continuum of services for those experiencing homelessness.

**Q: What is Arlington County's response to the issue of homelessness and what is the Action Plan to Ending Homelessness.**

**A:** The Action Plan for Ending Homelessness, **Within our Reach**, is the tool we use that guides our local homeless response system (or Continuum of Care) in our work. It was developed with members of our **Continuum of Care** which is essentially all the partners who are engaged in responding to and ending homelessness. It includes nonprofit organizations, foundations, businesses, local government, people with lived experience who are invested in guiding systems and policies to better address their needs, and other individual community members who have a personal interest or stake in addressing homelessness in the community. The CoC is very inclusive and broad in that way.

The strategic plan looks at key areas of action or strategies needed in the community – providing robust and integrated services that meet people where they are. It includes an intentional focus on preventing homelessness to the extent that is possible and utilizing our homeless response system – our emergency shelters – when really there are no other resources for people to maintain or sustain their housing. It includes a commitment to **Housing First**, which means that we believe that everyone has the fundamental right to housing, and that there should be no pre-conditions or arbitrary conditions to accessing housing. The notion of Housing First is that helping people access permanent housing truly helps to fundamentally stabilize their lives, and then people might be more willing to engage in different services and supports to stay housed.

We have certain sub-populations that require more nuanced and tailored solutions – families experiencing homelessness, people experiencing chronic homelessness, transition-aged youth (transitioning out of foster care), immigrants and refugees, and survivors of domestic violence as examples. The Action Plan also calls out the need for affordable housing, employment services, and addressing racial equity as other key strategies. And last year, the plan was amended to include our COVID-19 response.

The Action Plan really helps us to define what our local needs are, align our work with best practices and learnings from across the country, and maximize local, state, and federal resources.



**Q: What is the Centralized Access System and why do Arlingtonians need to know about it?**

**A:** The **Centralized Access System** is the main point of access to emergency rental assistance or homeless services for people who are experiencing housing instability or homelessness. To receive federal or state funding, all CoC's must have a centralized access or a coordinated entry system. This is a strategy that HUD put in place to help to create a systemic and coordinated response to homelessness in communities. It prevents people from having to contact multiple shelters to find out if they have space; they don't have to manage understanding the various criteria in order to access services. It serves to improve access, transparency, and coordination within communities.

The Centralized Access System is housed in the Department of Human Services Community Assistance Bureau. People can walk in, make an appointment, or simply call and speak to an assessment specialist to access services. The Community Assistance Bureau also serves as a conduit to other supportive services and other resources that might be needed. People talk to an intake or referral specialist who completes a comprehensive assessment and works to figure out what options and assistance are available for them. For people experiencing homelessness or requesting shelter, staff will work to prevent or divert people from entering the homeless system. They can look to other resources or relationships the person may have in the community to help navigate or negotiate alternative housing options besides shelter.

It's important for Arlingtonians to know about Centralized Access because if they see someone experiencing homelessness, or they themselves are at risk of experiencing homelessness, facing eviction, or are currently experiencing homelessness, they can call (703) 228-1010 which is the main shelter line that is staffed 24-hours/7 days a week. During normal business hours, DHS staff respond to calls. Outside business hours, on weekends and holidays, the "1010" line is operated by our nonprofit partners. There is always someone who can answer the call 24/7, every day of the year, because we know emergencies happen outside of business hours. PathForward, Bridges to Independence, and New Hope Housing collaborate with DHS and rotate the "1010" line throughout the year.

**Q: What general misconceptions do people have about people who experience homelessness?**

**A:** There is a stigma associated with homelessness. Usually, we might think of someone sleeping outside with shopping carts taking up space in public areas. There is a perception that this is what experiencing homelessness looks like. There is also a whole segment of "hidden homelessness:" survivors of domestic violence who are fleeing imminent danger; families who are doubling up and couch surfing; young adults who can't stay safely in their homes; and potentially a whole host of people who won't reach out to services because of the fear or stigma associated with asking for help. There is inter-generational poverty. There are families experiencing homelessness and living in our community's shelters whose children go to our schools and neighbors on the brink of homelessness. But they do not necessarily fit our mental models of homelessness, so we might not even be aware of their needs. But this does not negate the humanity and dignity that all people, including those sleeping outside, who may not have access to fresh clothes, laundry, or restrooms, deserve.

We are quick to judge, and we are quick to look down on others and ask, "Why don't they just go and access services?" People have a right to say that they are not interested in engaging in services. People are making decisions to stay outside where it is unsafe, versus coming inside to places where they have to deal with other factors like living in tight quarters with strangers or dealing with staff who are involved in their day-to-day activities. This is not to say that shelter staff are not supportive or compassionate, but people have the right to make decisions for themselves. Their decisions may be compounded by the trauma of homelessness, by untreated mental illness, or substance use to cope with their experiences. But they are real and complicated dynamics that don't negate that everyone deserves the same amount of dignity, respect, and humanity.



**Q: How has caring for people who are or at risk of experiencing homelessness changed during COVID and will these changes be maintained for the foreseeable future?**

**A:** Homeless response systems across the country are strained systems - they are not resourced appropriately. By their very nature, homeless response systems are crisis response systems. We are already responding to the crisis of housing loss, mental health, and physical health needs. So now we couple that with the crisis of the pandemic, and you are adding a layer of complexity and strain on an already strained system.



Yes, COVID-19 has had major impacts on both the people experiencing homelessness and the people who are working to support those people during a time when everyone is facing the collective trauma caused by the pandemic. We've begun to pivot our thinking to what it means to live with the pandemic, including what it means to maintain a safe and effective system with an ongoing pandemic. We are embedding all of the work we have done and all we have learned about preventing and mitigating the spread of COVID as part of our daily practice.

**Q: What are you personally proudest of as it relates to the County's work on the issue of homelessness?**

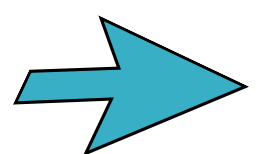
**A:** I have shared this with our partners before, but I am blown away by the community's capacity and resilience despite the impact of the pandemic. Our shelters have stayed open, we are helping people in record numbers into permanent housing, and people are staying housed. The County has done a tremendous amount of work preventing people from experiencing homelessness while we are also maintaining a safe and compassionate response to people who have no other housing options. We have leaned into the expertise and practices our County and nonprofits have developed over the years. I am proud to be able to work alongside community partners who have that level of commitment, drive and passion for these issues.

**Q: Why is it important for the community to contribute to the cause of ending homelessness?**

**A:** Homelessness is a community issue, and it requires a community response. It requires being informed and invested and participating at all levels of that response and to address and support homelessness at its root causes. The County and our nonprofits cannot do it alone.

## Helpful Links and Resources

Click to access information



- Arlington County's Continuum of Care
- CoC Annual Report 2020-2021
- Within Our Reach - Three Year Strategic Plan for Arlington County
- Arlington County's Action Plan for Ending Homelessness
- Understanding Housing First - National Alliance to End Homelessness
- **If you or someone you know needs help, call (703) 228-1010, 24/7**

[pathforwardva.org](https://pathforwardva.org)