

Episode 7: Santa Clara County's Continuum of Care

Welcome to Dwellings, a podcast from the City of San José Housing Department, where we talk with experts about ending homelessness, building affordable housing and exploring housing policies at the city and state level. I'm your host Alli Rico.

On today's episode, I'm joined by Kathryn Kaminski, acting deputy director for the Office of Supportive Housing in Santa Clara County, to learn more about the Continuum of Care and the role it plays in ending homelessness.

Alli Rico (AR): Can you explain what it is you do for Santa Clara County, and what your office does?

Kathryn Kaminski (KK): I am the acting deputy director for the [Office of Supportive Housing for the County of Santa Clara](#). Um, in what I do specifically is I oversee our Continuum of Care, um, as well as, um, administrative functions in our office, and also currently oversee our joint departmental operations center, which is in charge of our COVID-19 response for our homeless community as well as, um, financial assistance for folks in isolation and quarantine. Um, and office more broadly, the Office of Supportive Housing, um, is both the service provider; we run programs out of our office, permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing programs. We are a funder of services across, um, across the community. And we have a housing and community development division as well, that funds affordable housing. And so our mission is to provide affordable housing for the most vulnerable people in our community, um, and um, more broadly, to end homelessness in Santa Clara County.

AR: So how does the [Continuum of Care](#) work? As I understand, there are a lot of pieces to it.

KK: Very good question, and, uh, uh, a bit of a complicated program and answer. So, I'll try to be as clear as possible. So, the Continuum of Care - the COC is we usually call it - um, is a, both a federally funded program, but also sort of more, uh, locally a group of stakeholders that sets a policy and a strategic, um, mission for our homeless efforts here. So, on the federal side, this is a program that is through the Housing and Urban Development Department, um, and is designed to assist individuals and families experiencing homelessness, to provide the services they need, um, and to move them into permanent housing with a goal of long-term stability. Um, more broadly, um, it is also around, the COC is also designed to promote community wide planning, um, and strategic use of our resources to end homelessness, to improve coordination with - and integration with mainstream resources, uh, to improve data collection and performance management. Um, and really to allow - The federal government allows us to tailor our programs within those goals, to tailor our programs to meet the needs in our community. So locally we have, the COC is really a broad group of stakeholders from the people providing the services. We have a governing board, um, that sort of, uh, directs the work of the COC. We have several work groups that set policies, um, for the COC and for our homeless services more broadly. Um, and so it's, it's a very large group, including people with lived experience of homelessness, um, so that they were making sure we're raising their voices and, and the way that we're

implementing programs and the way that we're allocating resources. So it's really, uh, uh, um, a really broad efforts, uh, to coordinate and align our efforts, uh, to be most effective.

AR: And the way that I understand it is that Destination: Home until somewhat recently was the Continuum - Were they operating the Continuum of Care or how? I don't understand it that well.

KK: Good question. Until recently we shared a board, so the Destination: Home board also served as the Continuum of Care board. Um, but the administration of the COC program that we have, uh. We have a governing board that is made up of, um, community members, stakeholders in our community. They designate a collaborative applicant, um, which means they designate the entity that will sort of submit the application to the federal government for our funding. The Office of Supportive Housing is that collaborative applicant. They also, the board also designates, um, a lead agency to oversee all of our data collection efforts. And they also have designated the Office of Supportive Housing in that role. So, um, the Office of Supportive Housing is sort of the administrative entity, but the board is the governing entity that sets the direction and policy for the COC.

AR: Okay, cool. How do you get funding for the COC? Like, and how do, how does the funding that comes into the COC, how does it then impact the local nonprofits that you work with?

KK: So there's a few things. Uh, a few important things to, um, that I'll talk about here. First of all, is the COC funding itself. So we get about \$28 million annually. Right now we have about \$28 million annually coming from the COC program as a funding source. The way that we get that funding is, um, it is competitive. Um, so unlike some of the other Housing and Urban Development grants that are, that are, um, based on formula alone, this is a national competition. Um, so what we do is hold a local competition every year, that is open to any nonprofit who wants to apply, any nonprofit or local government who wants to apply for a COC project. Um, and that might be a permanent supportive housing project, it might be, uh, you know, rapid rehousing project, but it's a housing program. Um, and then we have, uh, uh, local rank and review panel. So we have non-conflicted panelists that might be, um, representatives of nonprofits that aren't receiving funding, people with lived experience, who review all the applications and rank them in priority order. And then what we, as the collaborative applicant, we meaning the Office of Supportive Housing. We take the rank list and put together the rest of the application and submit that to the federal government. And they decide who, which, how many projects will be funded as they look across the projects submitted nationally. Um, so we've been able to increase our funding every year. In fact, over the last five years, I think we've doubled our annual Continuum of Care grants, um, from the federal government. So we're very successful in that national competition, because our agencies are, um, are successful in their projects. Their outcomes are good, our, our community has come together and really, um, implemented some very strong programs. Um, but in addition to the direct COC funding, there's a lot of other funding sources that are tied to the COC. For example, the, the, um, there has been some recent state grants that came directly to the COC. They also uh, gave money directly to the City of San José and the, and the County directly.

But there was, um, portions of those grants that went to the COC. And then there's other funding sources that may use, um, information from the COC, uh, to allocate their funds, whether it's the data we collect, um, that influences the funding, or for example, the point in time count that we conduct that that will, um, be the basis for funding that comes from federal, state, or local sources.

AR: Do the, all of the non-profits that work with the COC, do they, do they need to like report back every single thing that they're working on or only in so far as the funding that they get from you? If that question makes sense.

KK: Um, so we, they don't formally report to the COC. What we do is, um, we administer, uh, a community-wide database called the [Homeless Management Information System](#). Um, and so basically all it is, it's a database that every we, we, um, the COC and the County and the City of San José all provide funding for this, so it's not on the agencies to have to pay more money to participate um, in terms of licensing and training, we provide all that. And then we, um, we ask all agencies, whether they're funded with COC or not, to participate in that, so that we have a, uh, a better idea in our community of one, the need, the needs of the homeless individuals in our community, and also how our system is doing in serving, um, serving the most vulnerable people. So how, which programs are working really well, how we can improve those programs. Having a comprehensive system-wide database where we're, we're looking at that is incredibly helpful in our strategic planning and our resource allocation. It's also really helpful on a, on an individual basis because our case, you know, as you might expect, many of, um, our clients experiencing homelessness are served, are accessing resources from multiple agencies and nonprofits in our community. And it helps them better coordinate, um, across those services so that we are providing the best support that we can, uh, to the people who need it.

AR: And what, what did we do because there are other, other counties have COCs, it's not just Santa Clara County. Correct? Because it's a federal program?

KK: Yeah. Most, um, larger communities have them. And then for small rural areas, they're part of a COC that's called the Balance of State. So every community is covered by a COC, but the larger areas, uh, population-wise have, sort of administer their own.

AR: Gotcha. So what did, what did local governments do before HUD established this program? How did - the way that I understand it from like, talking to Jen Loving, um, is that it was, it was kind of like everybody was stepping on each other's toes and all doing kind of the same thing. Um, so what, what did we do before we had this organized group?

KK: Yeah, I think it was much more disjointed. I mean, there were, there certainly were still local governments and nonprofits doing incredible work, but, um, it was far less coordinated and strategic in terms of leveraging our, our joint contributions to do as much as we possibly can in terms of using the same measures of success across our community, so that, um, you know, we are comparing apples to apples and, and setting policies. So that setting policy for the community at, um, our entire community of service providers, so that clients are seeing - receive the same level of care and treatment as to the extent possible. Um, and it's fair and equitable in the way that we're allocating resources. Unfortunately, we live, we've always

been in a resource-scarce environment when it comes to supporting the people that need housing assistance, um, and there's never been enough to meet the need. So one of our, you know, one of the real benefits of having this, uh, strategic alignment across our community is that um, it's a more fair and equitable way, um, to prioritize those resources for the people that need it the most.

AR: Does the COC have any, any hands in what's going on with, um, [Project Homekey](#) and those hotel purchases, or is that a separate program?

KK: Um, it's, it's not a COC program directly, but the partners and, uh, agencies that are either applicants for those projects or the providers that are going to be providing services at those projects are all involved in the COC, um, and aligned with the COC in terms of their, their goals and what they're trying to achieve. So, um, some of the, a couple of projects where the counties, the city, um, you know, the city of mount - the City of San José, the City of Mountain View partnered with [LifeMoves](#) on a project. So we're in close communication with them to make sure that their efforts are aligned with the goals of our Community Plan to End Homelessness, um, but they're not COC funded directly.

AR: How involved is the COC with developing the [Community Plan to End Homelessness](#)?

KK: Very! So we, um, took the leadership role in developing the Community Plan with our partners at Destination: Home, but really this Continuum of Care board is that is the oversight, provides oversight for the Community Plan to End Homelessness um, and will be that governing body that will make sure that we're moving towards our goals and aligning resources. Um, but it's, the COC also was the, um, you know, we did as much outreach as, as possible to make sure we were engaging people from across the community and the development of that plan, um, and making sure we were incorporating as many voices as possible and, and how we were in the recommendations we were making in the strategies we were making that are, that got included in the plan.

AR: And can you talk a little bit about how important it is to have the lived experience members of your COC board and your, and the Community Plan?

KK: Yeah, I, I think it's, um, it's a critical piece of any successful effort to end homelessness is making sure that we are working really closely with folks with lived experience because, I mean, for obvious reasons, they know better than anybody, the needs of people in that, in that position, in a position of, um, that they were once in. Um and they, also, many of them have been through programs that we operate. And so understanding their experience in going through our system, um, you know, staying in shelters, um, being in housing programs, can really, their feedback and input and how to improve those programs is critical. Um, you know, data tells us one thing and gives us some perspective on what's working, but, really that knowledge, um, and the voices of people who, who can tell us, um, what we need to do better is, is essential as we move forward. So one of the values, we have two guiding values of our Community Plan to End Homelessness, and one of them is specifically to, um, raise the voices of people with lived experience and share power with our unhoused neighbors, as we, as we move these strategies forward, which I think has, has always been a part of what we do, but we are, um, are trying to do more than we ever have in the past. Um, and our

[Lived Experience Advisory Board](#), um, that Jen probably talked about on the previous, uh, podcasts is, uh, has been an incredible, um, you know, just an incredible group to work with in improving our programs, improving our system and doing better. Um, they're super dedicated and knowledgeable and, uh, influential. And, um, I'm so grateful that they were a part of the Community Plan and a part of the COC more broadly in how we set policy and funding decisions as well.

AR: We have, I feel like.... I've only lived here for three years and I've worked for the City for just over a year. And I, I feel like I keep learning about new nonprofit agencies that are working to, to end homelessness and to help shelter unhoused residents. What are the benefits, and the drawbacks, of having so many nonprofits that are all working towards the same goal?

KK: Um, yeah, I think the benefit really is that we, the more partners we have working towards the common goal, the more services we can provide, um, and the more, uh, the. Increased access to services is a huge component of, of what can make our programs, a success and making sure, more agencies means I think more access, easy access for clients. And, um, that might mean, you know, working with community partners that are, um, you know, uh, really have a strong neighborhood presence, who know a specific community, um, better than I would, or Jen would, or other partners would and can really help us make sure services are specifically tailored to that neighborhood. And, and that goes across different populations, you know, working with our, uh, [providers that work with survivors of domestic violence](#) or working with [providers that serve, um, youth and young adults](#) like that, the more that we have, you know, they're going to know the needs of their community and the people they serve and be able to tailor those services, while still aligning with sort of the broader purpose, um, of, of the Community Plan to End Homelessness, um, and larger community goals. So I think that's really the true benefit, u, more ideas, um, more programs and, and, um, you know, uh, just more advocates in our community for the work that we're going to do. Um, I think the disadvantages is, is just, uh, uh, more complex coordination, um, but you know, making sure, sure that we are, um, working with, with all of those partners, for example, the sort of just the on the administrative side, um, training more people to utilize our, our homeless management information database, so that, um, so that we're coordinating with those new agencies. So, you know, there may be some, uh, additional coordination needed, but I think the overall benefit of, of having more varied service providers far outweighs that, that burden and that administrative burden is one that's, you know, that's, that's a huge part of why the CDC exists so that we can help coordinate across those agencies.

AR: Do you ever run into an issue where like there's competition for funding among all of the different nonprofits? Or has the fact that we have so many, um, does that just mean that year after year we continue to get more funding for programs?

KK: Uh, well, unfortunately we're always, you know, we're, we're always still have, we always still have less resources than we need to serve everybody. And so there, there is competition for funding, but what I have seen in our community is agencies really come together around that common goal. And, um, and, and they do that when it comes to

funding as well. So, on the, on the Continuum of Care side, we, as a community decide how we're going to prioritize projects. And that is, um, that is based on whether the needs of the community and not what are the needs of one agency over another. Um, so that we're really addressing this in a, in a systemic way and a comprehensive way rather than pitting one agency against another for that competition. So, it really is, um, sort of a coordinated effort. Um, unfortunately I wish we were in a place where there was no competition because we could fund all the projects, you know, all the great programs that, that, um, agencies could do, um, and, and fully meet the need of, uh, of the people in our community. But, um, that is, that is one of the goals that we're working towards and hope to expand, uh, over the next, um, the next five years with this Community Plan to End Homelessness.

AR: Does the funding from [Measure A](#), does the Continuum of Care, like work with that at all? Or is that also a separate part of the Office of Supportive Housing in the County?

KK: We definitely work together to try to, um, align those resources and leverage as much as we can. So, for example, um, uh, permanent supportive housing development may be funded with Measure A for the development side of it. We may, um, for the folks that, um, move in and, um, are living in that development, the supportive services that they receive, um, the case management, that might be funded by, uh, one of our Continuum of Care programs. Um, and that's, that's fairly common for us where we're trying to leverage as much as possible to use, um, our COC, uh, services to support those, um, developments.

AR: Cool. Why, what drew you to this work and why did you get involved in housing and homelessness work?

KK: Yeah. Uh, great question. Um, you know, for me, housing is a human right. I think that we, everybody in our country and everybody in our community deserves a safe and stable place to live. Um, and I was initially drawn to this work, I started my career in community organizing and a lot of the issues I saw people facing, um, as I was doing, my work was around, um, or one of the primary barriers to addressing issues was housing instability. And, um, I felt passionate about, um, you know, the housing first model and that people need a safe place to stay before they can tackle other issues that they might be facing. Um, so I, I began working in the housing sector, um, and initially, initially was working on sort of more of the policy side of things, um, but was really drawn to sort of the local community work, um, in Santa Clara County because of the, the strong partnerships here and, and the united vision that this, that this community has towards this common goal.

AR: We, I want to be, I want to give people listening to the podcast, a, uh, a way of, of helping if they like, I want to give them a call to action. If they feel like they've gotten to the end of the podcast and are like, "well, what the hell am I suppose, how do, how does one person help?" Um, so what, what is one piece of advice that you would give to somebody listening for how they could get more involved in ending homelessness or even just housing advocacy in general? What would you recommend?

KK: Couple of things. I think the most immediate and easiest things that people can do is educate themselves and talk with their neighbors and their family and friends about the issue. About not only homelessness, but affordable housing. A lot of the challenges we have,

um, are just support for, you know, low-income housing in, in our neighborhoods. And I think, um, we have, um, a lot of work to do to educate each other and learn the issue. And, um, that's one thing that I think is critically important and can be done immediately. You know, if folks have time or financial resources, um, looking to work with one of our many, um, dozens, if not hundreds of agencies doing amazing work in our community, um, volunteering hours, I know that's tough right now, but there's still. You know, a lot of our homeless service agencies, their work never stopped, um, and, and need volunteers, um, even during this pandemic, but also need financial, um, support. So, um, if folks can donate to one of our part, one of our agencies across the community, um, those are some immediate things that, that people can do to support the cause.

AR: Was there anything that we missed?

KK: I don't think you missed anything, I just would take time to give a shout out to all of our, our partners and our nonprofit agencies that have been just working tirelessly all of the frontline staff, um, who don't get enough recognition for their always amazing work, but the work over the last nine months, and it's truly extremely difficult time to support our most vulnerable neighbors. I've been just amazed and inspired by their efforts and just want to say thank you to everybody. And I'm looking forward to continuing this work, this important work together.

Thanks so much to Kathryn for joining me on today's episode. If you'd like to learn more about the Continuum of Care, please visit the County Office of Supportive Housing site at sccgov.org/sites/osh.

Thanks for listening to Dwellings, the City of San José Housing Department podcast.

Our theme music is "Speed City," composed and performed by Ettaine Charles. Thanks to San José Jazz for letting us use your music.

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