Date: September 27, 2023

To: Tompkins County Housing and Economic Development Committee

From: Tammy Baker, Homeless Services Coordinator

Re: Home Together Tompkins Plan Recommendations

Home Together Tompkins Plan

It is recommended that the Tompkins County Legislature accept the Continuum of Care’s Home Together Tompkins Plan (HTTP).

Full adoption of the Plan is complicated by the fact that some regulations affecting the County are not fully aligned with a housing first model, so contingencies may need to be made to adopt the Home Together Tompkins Plan in full or in part.

Housing First

The Continuum of Care and Home Together Tompkins Plan recommends a commitment to a “Housing First” approach. Housing First is defined by the National Alliance to End Homelessness as:

(...)

If the County were to accept the Plan as it is written, the Legislature may consider efforts to advocate that New York State commit to a Housing First model and that regulations of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) are fully aligned with the Housing First model specifically as it relates to regulations that allow an individual to be approved for Temporary Assistance (TA) at DSS. Accepting the plan may require additional County investments in community agencies that are not subject to all the same state regulations as the County.
Key Recommendations

Key recommendations from the Home Together Tompkins Plan are addressed below. Following each recommendation, “Interpretation of role of County” refers to the potential role the County would play with plan implementation.

1) A commitment to building 100 studio and 1-bedroom units of Permanent Supportive Housing.

Interpretation of role of County: Staff participation in conversations with potential affordable & supportive housing developers, supportive service providers, and Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency to bring more affordable and supportive housing projects to the community. Continued support for the new projects through the Community Housing Development Fund Program.

- See addendum one, Housing Inventory, for current and pending Permanent Supportive Housing units. Over the next two years there are 106 Permanent Supportive Housing units that will be coming online.
- In 2023, the Department of Planning and Sustainability (DPS) began targeting outreach to municipalities, other entities, and major employers to identify potential sites for affordable and mixed-income development. DPS will include in those discussions how Permanent Supportive Housing or set asides may fit the site, as appropriate.

2) Low-barrier shelter that uses a trauma-informed approach to safety.

Interpretation of role of County: Work with DSS, Office of Temporary Disability Assistance (OTDA), Continuum of Care, Homeless Services Coordinator and St John’s Community Services to address barriers to sheltering. Explore developing a larger shelter and increasing the Department of Social Services (DSS) budget so that St. John’s Community Services can add more case managers for a better client to staff ratio.

- St. John’s Community Services, located at 618 West State St., is the County’s only homeless shelter. It has a 26-bed capacity and offers a trauma-informed approach to working with clients.
- It is difficult to have a totally low-barrier shelter since approval for sheltering payments is done at DSS which is required to follow OTDA regulations. For instance, Temporary Assistance (TA) clients are required to be in treatment if a referral is recommended by DSS’s Credentialied Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC). Shelter applicants are screened by the CASAC to determine if their substance use is a barrier to self-sufficiency. If so, a referral is made to treatment programs. If a person does not follow the CASAC’s referral recommendation, they will not be approved for shelter. If a person follows through with the recommended referral, they must stay in compliance with the provider’s recommendation to maintain their TA.
• It’s important to note that our local treatment agencies, Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services and Alcohol and Drug Council are not abstinence based. An individual can still be in treatment, actively use substances, be provided shelter, and have access to wrap around services and support through the treatment provider.

• There is some ability to shelter a small number of individuals when a person shows up after hours or on the weekends seeking shelter. The individual(s) must then go to DSS the next business day to complete the appropriate paperwork for approval.

• During Code Blue (Cold Weather Policy) between October 15th – April 15th the shelter is low barrier since there is not an approval process for shelter.

• In the past there has been a disconnect between the role of DSS and community-based outreach workers attempting to offer application assistance to clients for Temporary Assistance and SNAP. According to DSS regulations, applicants have the right to participate in their own application process, and DSS staff has an obligation to support them through the process. The application process can be a barrier for those that are illiterate, intimidated by the forms, using a primary language other than English, have untreated mental health issues and/or may be under the influence of a substance. Further information sessions between DSS and community-based agencies regarding role clarification and application assistance are encouraged.

• The Home Together Tompkins Plan strongly suggests a low barrier shelter that does not require sobriety. Saint John’s Community Services, the County’s shelter provider, does not require sobriety. If someone who is approved is staying at the shelter and comes in under the influence of a substance, staff at the shelter will have the person stay in the Friendship Center until they are deemed safe to go to their room.

• Other barriers may include someone being unable to be sheltered due to orders of protection or sex offender status. The shelter also cannot accept families. In these cases, arrangements are made at alternate locations in the community.

It is recommended that County Administration, Department of Social Services, Continuum of Care, and St. John’s Community Services work together to identify and mitigate the barriers to shelter wherever possible.

3) A “housing surge” strategy and by-name list.

Interpretation of role of County: To provide more housing, either a larger shelter, transitional, permanent supportive housing, and/or affordable housing.

A Housing Surge as defined by HUD in the Home Together Tompkins Plan:

HUD defines a housing surge as a concentrated, time-limited community effort through which key stakeholders collaborate to connect a targeted group of households to a pre-identified pool of housing subsidies and units as well as other resources and services in order to house a large number of people in a short time frame. 20 Housing surges have been used to quickly rehouse people during and after natural disasters, to quickly deploy large amounts of new resources, and to target groups or
people experiencing homelessness that may require special considerations, such as veterans, older adults, or youth. The housing surge expedites the housing process by streamlining procedures and creating temporary mechanisms (such as a pool of vacant units, pre-inspections, and same-day application processing) that break through common procedural delays in rehousing (e.g. unit identification, inspections, check processing, etc.).

- According to the CoC’s Director of Housing Initiatives, our County has not yet experienced a housing surge. It is worth noting that our county received Emergency Services Grant-COVID (ESG-CV) in 2022, which housed 304 people; 168 single adults/couples without children; 50 Head of Household with a total of 86 children. 72% of recipients moved into or remained in permanent housing. The ESG-CV allowed our community to house many individuals where there were vacancies with very little criteria. The ESG-CV ends September 30, 2023.

- According to the CoC the next housing surge will happen when the Asteri project begins to house individuals in Spring 2024. The Enhanced Outreach Team will create a by-name list of individuals to house at the Asteri project.

- Our community does not have a list of landlords willing to house individuals that are chronically homeless outside of Permanent Supportive Housing.

4) Mitigation funds for business owners and landlords.

_Interpretation of role of County: This recommendation does not have an impact on the County._

- According to the Home Together Tompkins Plan, the mitigation fund would be available to landlords and businesses approved by the Home Together Tompkins Plan Lived Experience Board that would be eligible for financial support up to a certain amount in case of damages or theft incurred while serving people with severe service needs.

- The amount available for the mitigation fund according to Home Together Tompkins Plan is $50,000. The source of the mitigation funds is not identified in the Plan and will most likely be through philanthropy.

- According to Department of Social Services, $50,000 will not be enough to mitigate damages incurred by business owners and landlords for long.

5) Other incentives such as a shopping cart exchange and cash for trash program.

_Shopping Carts: Interpretation of role of County: This recommendation doesn’t have an impact on the County._

_Cash for Trash: Interpretation of role of County: There may be a cost to the County for disposing of the trash bags. Any effort would require close coordination with the Department of Recycling and Materials Management to ensure a process where needles are not present in the trash bags. Since the Department of Recycling and Materials Management is an enterprise unit, funding for this effort would need to come from grants or through the County’s contingency fund._
Some notes on what has been done over the last few years:

- The city put a dumpster behind Walmart and the outreach team asked people in the encampments to clean up their sites and the area in general by throwing garbage in the dumpster. The dumpster was there for three months and only two or three bags of garbage were thrown in.

- The second garbage initiative was using the City’s yellow trash bags, which are equivalent to a trash tag. The bags were handed out to specific people in the encampments to fill with garbage. DPW put a trash bin behind Lowes and Walmart. Outreach workers provided sharps containers. Unfortunately, needles continued to show up in the yellow trash bags, so DPW stopped picking up the garbage for safety reasons.

6) Low-barrier move-in packages and assistance for moving from homeless to housed.

*Interpretation of role of County: This recommendation doesn’t have an impact on the County.*

7) Three enhanced, centralized housing navigator positions.

*Interpretation of role of County: Human Services Coalition was awarded $174,167 from the Tompkins County Recovery Fund of which $72,000 is being used for hiring one or more housing specialists. These new positions would provide additional support in providing comprehensive housing services for those unhoused and to provide continued support once housed.*

- Our community currently has between 10-13 outreach workers between five agencies who support individuals with basic needs, linkage to services and support navigating our shelter system and finding housing.

8) Paid board positions for people with lived experience.

*Interpretation of role of County: This recommendation doesn’t have an impact on the County. It is important to note that any person that is in receipt of state or federal Social Services could have their eligibility for benefits impacted by receiving compensation for programs where they are paid.*

9) Professional development opportunities for people with lived experience.

*Interpretation of role of County: Working with the Chamber of Commerce and Workforce New York on possible professional development opportunities.*
Further considerations which are not addressed in the Home Together Tompkins Plan:

There are client and community safety concerns with unsheltered, sheltered and housed individuals with severe service needs which the Housing First model does not address. Severe Service Needs refers to persons who have been identified as having the most severe service needs for whom any combination of one or more of the following factors is true:

1) Facing significant challenges or functional impairments, including any physical, mental, developmental or behavioral health disabilities regardless of the type of disability, which require a significant level of support in order to maintain permanent housing (this factor focuses on the level of support needed and is not based on disability type);
2) high utilization of crisis or emergency services to meet basic needs, including but not limited to emergency rooms, jails, and psychiatric facilities;
3) experiencing a vulnerability to illness or death;
4) having a risk of continued or repeated homelessness;
5) having a vulnerability to victimization, including physical assault, trafficking, or sex work
6) currently living in an unsheltered situation or having a history of living in an unsheltered situation.

- Some individuals that fall into the severe service need category that are approved by DSS can be difficult to shelter at sites without security onsite due to safety concerns for themselves and others when exhibiting violent and/or criminal behaviors.

- If someone with Severe Service Needs is housed and chooses to not engage in available supports, behavioral issues such as drug use or experience ongoing untreated mental health issues may persist untreated. This makes the housing situation unsafe not only for themselves but for their neighbors. If someone doesn't engage in services, the apartment and building can be damaged with the cost falling on the property owner, and with other tenants not feeling safe. More mental health services and substance use support are needed along with structure and accountability.

- In addition to the concerns of safety, more housing with wraparound services for individuals with mental health concerns and substance use support is needed along with structure and accountability for those clients.