

A Story of Change:



Ending Youth Homelessness in Northwest Michigan

"Most young people go to school and worry about things like prom. I thought about homelessness and foster care and making it through high school. My goal was always to support other people in doing better than I did in those systems. If I've done that, then I've done what I need to do to make the world a better place."

— David Van Horn, former Youth Action Board Chair, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

"I remember one youth listening session where a 15-year-old woman recalled wondering when she was in elementary school, 'Why are other kids playing at recess? Aren't they all living out of a car like me?' Hearing her story was the turning point in my emotional connection to the work. I'm fully committed."

— Ashley Halladay-Schmandt, Director, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

Jessica Conrad with



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Resources for change.

This case study originally appeared in *Stories of Change: How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region*, by Jessica Conrad with *Rotary Charities of Traverse City*. *Stories of Change* includes four case studies. Three feature the evolution of multi-stakeholder systems change initiatives in Northwest Lower Michigan working to address youth/young adult homelessness, food insecurity, and barriers to health and health equity. The fourth shares the story of how Rotary Charities, a place-based funder, came to support systems change work.

Stories of Changes offers a unique look at what's possible when many individuals, organizations, and initiatives adopt a shared approach to affecting positive change and align their efforts to address the upstream sources of our toughest community challenges. Full of actionable insights, the case studies are an informative example of purpose-driven collaboration and a source of hope in an unpredictable, fast-changing world.

Acknowledgements

Stories of Change would not have been possible without the contributions of so many who are deeply committed to creating communities where all can thrive, including our storyteller, the dozens of changemakers interviewed for the project, and Rotary Charities' board and staff members, past and present.

Place-based systems change involves many people working across sectors and fields. The stories told here are collective stories of and for the communities from which they have come, and great care has been taken to tell the truest stories possible. Yet with collective stories, there is not one truth, but many. We acknowledge that the stories included here may not represent the whole truth for all involved.

We are deeply grateful for those who have contributed their memories and perspectives to support us in documenting this transformative work and for the skillful storyteller who has woven these threads together to create this narrative tapestry.

About the author

We want to thank storyteller Jessica Conrad for expertly leading this project. Jessica handled each story with care and dedication—careful with its complexity, shared language, and multiple perspectives. Her process embodied values like patience, relationship building and trust, clear communication and roles, and inclusivity, reflecting a deep grounding in systems practice.

For over a decade, Jessica has been working at the frontiers of positive change as a researcher and writer, storyteller, communications strategist, program manager, and curriculum designer. She brings extensive experience designing and delivering strategic initiatives and transformative learning opportunities—including graduate-level courses focused on systems and complexity theory and leadership—in her previous roles at the RE-AMP Network, the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Forum for the Future's School

of Systems Change, and, most recently, the Garfield Foundation. While with the Foundation, Jessica contributed to its collaborative networks portfolio and stewarded a community of practice for grantee partners leading large, multi-stakeholder projects focused on equitable climate change, cancer prevention, community development, and food solutions.

Jessica currently supports purpose-driven people and organizations in a consulting capacity with research and writing, coaching, facilitation, and custom offerings in the realms of leadership, storytelling and communications, organizational learning and development, and program design. You can reach her at hello@jessicaconrad.com.

About Rotary Charities of Traverse City

Rotary Charities of Traverse City is a 501c3 grantmaking public charity. It was founded in 1976 after oil was discovered on property owned by the Traverse City Rotary Club. The organization provides grants, impact investments, and opportunities for connection and learning across a five-county area in Northwest Lower Michigan to contribute to an adaptive and thriving region for everyone.

Learn more about Rotary Charities at:

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Introduction

Since 2016, the Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness (NWCEH) has been working to prevent and end the persistent challenge of youth/young adult homelessness through a coordinated community approach. More than 18 organizations and agencies from across five counties in Northwest Michigan have united behind the shared vision of a community where every youth/young adult has safe, appropriate, and permanent housing.

To advance their audacious goals, NWCEH members have drawn on system change practices to expand their understanding of the system at the heart of their work, to strengthen the connectivity between youth-serving systems, and to create an equitable and resilient homeless response system specifically for youth/young adults—a community asset that has never existed before. Centering the voices and leadership of youth/young adults with lived experience has been paramount to the work, as has the commitment of everyone involved to the values of collaboration, accountability, and data-driven decision-making.

This story of change shares how NWCEH members and their partners are working together in new ways to bring an end to youth/young adult homelessness and to interrupt the cycle of chronic homelessness that begins for many at an early age. A story of systems change, it is organized into four phases of development that support multi-stakeholder initiatives in advancing enduring change.¹

About the Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

The NWCEH (formerly the Northwest Michigan Continuum of Care) seeks to make homelessness rare, brief, and one-time across Northwest Michigan. NWCEH members address housing issues through a community-based process that develops a comprehensive, coordinated continuum

of care for individuals and families who are at risk of and/or currently experiencing housing instability.² Since 2006, over 18 local organizations and agencies and numerous volunteers who belong to the Coalition have been working to meet the needs of homeless youth/young adults. Their efforts represent the single initiative in the region committed to ending youth homelessness.



The Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness serves youth/young adults in Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Leelanau, and Kalkaska Counties in Northwest Michigan.

The persistent challenge of youth homelessness

Though often invisible to the public, homelessness is an extensive and persistent problem for youth/young adults in Northwest Michigan. “We’ve learned through our youth who experience homelessness that being alone and on the street is often the safer option than staying home,” says Ashley Halladay-Schmandt, who serves as the NWCEH director. For many, especially those in rural areas, homelessness might look like couch surfing, doubling up in someone else’s space, or staying in abandoned buildings—circumstances that are constantly subject to change.

Given this, youth homelessness is distinctly challenging to quantify. Yet thanks to three years of data drives and extensive outreach efforts, reliable data in 2019 reported that 154 youth/young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, along with 40 unaccompanied youth under the age of 18, experienced homelessness across the counties served by the NWCEH that year. These totals represent the number of youth/young adults who

¹ See the appendix, “Using a Systems Change Approach to Address Complex Community Issues,” for a description of a systems change approach.

² Available from: <https://www.endhomelessnessmi.org>

engaged with the homeless response system by, for example, reaching out to a service provider for support in ending their homelessness experience. They do not represent a consistent year-round experience of homelessness.

To end youth homelessness, a community must achieve and maintain what's called "functional zero" youth/young adult homelessness, a scenario in which a greater number of youth/young adults are exiting homelessness than entering it.



The NWCEH uses the definition of homelessness from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: "literally homeless" is a condition in which an individual or family lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.³

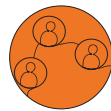
Focusing the lens on youth homelessness

Were it not for NWCEH's concerted efforts toward the goal of ending all homelessness in the early 2010s, Halladay-Schmandt acknowledges that the lens would not have focused on youth/young adult homelessness. Over five years, NWCEH partners leveraged their limited resources to overhaul the adult homeless response system, expanding their focus from housing those who are easiest to engage and serve to include housing those who are most challenging to serve. Shelter diversion practices, housing navigation, rent subsidies, and continual case management, in addition to other structural changes inside the system, have resulted in permanently housing greater numbers of those experiencing chronic homelessness across the region.

With the system more effectively serving adults by 2016, NWCEH was poised to look more carefully at the homelessness experience of other groups. To the delight of advocates who had consistently pressed the Coalition to consider the needs of youth/young adults inside an adult-serving system,

the question became, how was the system serving youth? In order to achieve the goal of ending all homelessness, NWCEH members shared a growing recognition of the need to shift their attention to youth/young adults who are at risk of experiencing chronic homelessness in the future.

Phase 1 - Convene Stakeholders and Commit to a Shared Purpose



Convene diverse stakeholders to explore how they might work together to address the source of a complex problem and define a shared purpose for their collaboration.

Assessing the need to identify missing perspectives

Unlike many systems change initiatives, the NWCEH already had the committed participation of a group of organizations, agencies, and volunteers when it began its systems change effort in earnest. Yet it lacked clarity about whether or not its current membership included all of the stakeholder perspectives from across the service system required to better serve youth/young adults experiencing housing instability. What was needed was a clearer picture of the youth homelessness experience across Northwest Michigan in order to identify missing perspectives and to begin honing in on a shared purpose that would guide the Coalition's collaboration.

The NWCEH applied for and received a small grant from Rotary Charities in 2016 to conduct a Youth Needs Assessment⁴ that would offer such a picture of youth/young adult homelessness. Thirty-six youth/young adults at risk of and/or currently experiencing housing instability participated in focus groups, and 120 completed an online survey. The results offered invaluable insights into the reasons why youth/young adults experience homelessness and where they turn for support and

³ *Criteria and Recordkeeping Requirements for Definition of Homelessness*, US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Jan. 2012, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/1974/criteria-and-recordkeeping-requirements-for-definition-of-homeless>.

⁴ *Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project*, Northwest Michigan Continuum of Care, 2016, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed01d42ee67267f4f242c48/t/636269f99eb6a468bd2f75d/1667394061482/A+youth+needs+assessment.pdf>.

shelter when they leave home. "The assessment helped me see that there was very little available for young people who are homeless in our system," recalls Halladay-Schmandt.

Centering the voices of youth/young adults

While the assessment began to shine a light on gaps within the service system, it also emphasized the critical importance of centering the voices of youth/young adults with lived experience in equitably transforming it. In response, the NWCEH worked to establish a Youth Action Board (YAB) in 2017 by recruiting those who had participated in the Youth Needs Assessment focus groups. David Van Horn was among the first to receive an invitation and describes the opportunity as a "natural fit" after having traveled around the U.S. advocating for foster care. Ari Elaine, another early invitee, hoped to dramatically change the Coalition's level of accountability to youth through their participation: "I joined because I didn't think youth voices were heard. I wanted to offer mine."

Van Horn and Elaine partnered in the effort to recruit others under the age of 25 to join the YAB and share their experiences with homelessness. "It took time," recalls Van Horn. "We sat at bookstores and other community hubs. Eventually, we were ten people strong." Meetings were held bimonthly at six o'clock over pizza and followed a set of agreements designed to create the conditions for safety and trust. Adults could not outnumber youth/young adults, for example, and every decision made by the NWCEH required involvement and final approval from the YAB to ensure that services for youth/young adults are developed with their guidance.

Challenges arose during Van Horn's tenure as YAB Chair, including how to compensate youth/young adults for their time, waning participation, and, consequently, decision points when Van Horn was the only YAB member present. "I didn't want to be the only young person giving input on NWCEH decisions, but we couldn't make other people show up." Even so, Van Horn reflects very positively

on his time with the YAB and the Coalition: "I really appreciate having been involved from the very beginning of the Coalition's focus on youth homelessness. Those experiences were some of the best of my life."

Leveraging Rotary Charities' grants to secure federal funding

While the YAB was taking shape, in early 2017 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the availability of \$33 million for competitive federal grants. Funding would be awarded to 10 communities for piloting innovative solutions to prevent and end youth homelessness. Keen on the opportunity, the NWCEH sought an additional grant from Rotary Charities to complete the rigorous HUD application with the participation and approval of the YAB. "Those were *the longest* days," Van Horn chuckles, admitting that the time investment was worth the effort. Later that year, the NWCEH was awarded \$685,000 in renewable funding from HUD for a Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project (YHDP) with the goal of developing a youth homeless response system.

Taking a systems approach itself, HUD required the participation of numerous regional agencies with systemically different approaches to youth/young adult homeless prevention. "We sometimes had representation from 15 agencies at the table. That's huge for the size of our community," explains Halladay-Schmandt, acknowledging how helpful the HUD requirement was for expanding the voices around the table, including some who had never worked on homelessness before. "We couldn't have reached such a high level of collaboration without the initial support of Rotary Charities," adds Tina Allen, who served as coordinator of the Northwest Michigan Continuum of Care when the federal funding was awarded.

Committing to a shared purpose

Through the initial phase of the YHDP development, an intentional community response capable of leveraging expertise and support from outside

the homeless service sector began to develop. Even more important, NWCEH members cohered around an initial shared purpose to create lasting solutions for youth/young adults at risk of and/or currently experiencing housing instability through coordinated community supports to prevent and end youth homelessness.

The Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness members who were involved in the early implementation of the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project include the Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency, Goodwill Northern Michigan, Traverse City Area Public Schools, Third Level at Child & Family Services of Northwestern Michigan, Greater Grand Traverse Area Continuum of Care, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Grand Traverse County Health Department, Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, Northwestern Michigan College, Traverse Area District Library, and Traverse City Police Department, in addition to numerous volunteers and social work interns.

"Systems change requires a group of community partners coming together in recognition that the problem doesn't belong to any one person or agency. Youth homelessness is an issue that affects us all and, more importantly, the youth and families we want to serve. Building relationships is key to making sure our services are connected so we can tackle the issue together."

— Maureen Clore, Director, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services for Antrim, Charlevoix, and Emmet Counties.

Phase 2 - Explore the Problem and Find Opportunities for Leverage



Explore the upstream causes of the complex problem to develop a shared understanding of the system and to identify promising opportunities for targeted intervention.

Mapping the system for shared understanding

To complement the Youth Needs Assessment, several NWCEH members set out to develop a systems map⁵ showing the factors that contribute to youth homelessness in the region. Rotary Charities had pointed the group to a free Systems Practice course offered through the Acumen Academy⁶ to produce the initial map with support from a consultant. A second map was later developed for the YHDP depicting the current pathways available to youth/young adults through the homeless response system toward stable housing. Both showed the services of multiple agencies (foster care, host homes, rental assistance, and more) overlaid upon one another, revealing points of connectivity, gaps, and inefficiencies in the current homeless response system.

People in this field often refer to the homeless response system, which is a clear set of programs, services, and professionals who support individuals in ending their homelessness experience. Through the mapping process, NWCEH members found that the system at the heart of their work to prevent and end youth/young adult homelessness is far broader and more deeply interconnected. The system that the NWCEH strives to transform includes both the explicit services and programs and agencies that deliver them, as well as the implicit ways the community responds to youth/young adults who face housing instability. NWCEH members came to understand that focusing on making changes to the homeless response system alone will not end youth/young adult homelessness. What's also needed is a profound cultural shift in the way people understand, respect, and equitably empower youth/young adults with lived experience.

"For us, there is a significant difference between the homeless response system and the 'systems work' we were embarking on."

— Tina Allen, former Coordinator, Northwest Michigan Continuum of Care

⁵ Homeless Youth Systems Map. Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Tr51UKL5IFHdVFWVXo4EvM8sO63xOBg/edit#slide=id.p1>.

⁶ Available from: <https://acumenacademy.org/course/systems-practice>

Building a Community Plan on evidence-based principles

Producing a systems map is sometimes enough for a systems change initiative to identify places where targeted intervention might produce out-sized impacts throughout a system. In the case of the YHDP, the process of designing an action plan for effecting lasting change helped NWCEH members more clearly articulate the system's boundaries, deepen their understanding of the upstream causes of youth/young adult homelessness, and identify opportunities for leverage.

Following the HUD award, Rotary Charities supported NWCEH members with another small grant to write *The Northwest Michigan Plan to End Youth Homelessness*⁷ (Community Plan for short), an inclusive and coordinated plan documenting different ways of working together to prevent and end youth homelessness. Coalition members collaboratively developed the plan over the course of a year and a half with extensive technical assistance from HUD, mutual learning with the nine other communities awarded HUD funding, and a priority on youth/young adult leadership through the YAB.

The NWCEH learned that transformation at scale would require partnering with other youth-serving systems, including the education, juvenile justice, behavioral health, and child welfare systems. The challenge was coming to agreement on what it would look like to operationalize the work across them. "It was my job to ask leaders inside other systems, 'How can we partner to make change happen?,'" says Allen. She goes on, "This way of working isn't natural. People usually want to do their own job and do it really well. They might need support from someone else, but only every once in a while. We had to give people reasons to join our table."

Through hundreds of conversations—different in nature than what was normally possible—and constant learning, what resulted was a flexible Community Plan informed by youth/young adults and built on evidence-based principles shared by other communities across the country.

Opportunities for leverage

The Community Plan identified opportunities for leverage that would have the greatest potential to impact the issue of youth homelessness at three levels of the system: structural, relational, and transformational.⁸

Structural change (policies, practices, and resource flows) – Leverage opportunities included:

- Addressing the gaps and inefficiencies uncovered within the current homeless response system, with a focus on shelter diversion, housing navigation, and continual case management for youth/young adults
- Building new exit strategies for youth/young adults out of homelessness
- Building bridges between youth-serving systems

Relational change (relationships, connections, and power dynamics) – Leverage opportunities included:

- Supporting youth/young adults in increasing their engagement in lasting positive relationships
- Empowering youth/young adults to have authority over their own lives
- Transforming the youth homeless response system's inequitable leadership models to share power with youth/young adults

⁷ *The Northwest Michigan Plan to End Youth Homelessness: Executive Summary*, Northwest Michigan Continuum of Care, July 2017, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed01d42ee67267f4f242c48/t/635febb5ffc942003b551d57/1667230652657/NorthwestMIYouthPlan_Executive+Summary.pdf.

⁸ Kania, John, et al. FSG, 2018, *The Water of Systems Change*, https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change.

Transformational change (mental models) –
Leverage opportunities included:

- Changing hearts and minds about youth/young adults, especially those who have experienced homelessness, and about what it will take to prevent and end youth homelessness in Northwest Michigan



“Nothing about youth without youth” has become a guiding principle for the Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness and its efforts to prevent and end youth/young adult homelessness.

Across all three levels, the NWCEH saw opportunities for leverage not just externally in the world “out there,” but also internally within the Coalition’s way of being and doing. Both are part of the system at the heart of their work. “We know that unless we are willing to see how we are part of the problem, we will never have the impact we desire,” grants Halladay-Schmandt.

Phase 3 - Design and Carry Out a Constellation of Actions



Design and carry out a systems-change strategy sequencing the actions necessary for creating out-sized impacts throughout the whole system.

By 2018, the NWCEH was equipped with the Community Plan and a strategy that members believed to be capable of effecting transformative change for the issue of youth/young adult homelessness through targeted intervention. Rotary Charities supported the Coalition with two additional grants (one in 2018 and a second in 2020), leveraging more than \$1.3 million in cash matches from HUD, the Michigan State Housing Authority, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Goodwill Northern Michigan, and the Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency to carry out the work.

Using these supports, the NWCEH seeks to create the conditions for systems change not just at the systemic level, but also at the personal and interpersonal levels in their way of being and doing as a group of individuals, agencies, and organizations.

A constellation of mutually-reinforcing actions

Using the Community Plan as a guide and shared infrastructure for support, NWCEH members are working diligently to carry out a constellation of mutually-reinforcing actions, some of which are highlighted below. They are confronting the challenges of systems change work head-on—in some cases giving up funding and stopping “successful” programs that have led to unintended consequences—and adapting strategy in response to changing contexts, such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Structural change (policies, practices, and resource flows)

Hosting regular youth listening sessions: The NWCEH discovers what systems-level changes are needed by listening carefully to youth/young adults with lived experience—and staying accountable to their suggestions. Over the years, the Coalition has hosted numerous youth listening sessions, where YAB members offer input to providers on how to tailor their services for youth/young adults. These sessions use an intentional format, sometimes referred to as a fishbowl, that gives youth/young adults the floor, so to speak, to share their reflections while adults simply listen. A set of open-ended questions about the system (e.g., How did you come into homelessness?) are usually teed up by a facilitator first, followed by a set of questions related to the service system (e.g., What’s your experience of the shelter?).

“It was important to create a space where participants felt valued for what they had to say,” Van Horn emphasizes. “Because we were valued.

We were influencing and approving programs." Perhaps not all youth/young adults felt the same all of the time. Elaine remembers "feedback from other YAB members feeling a lack of trust toward adult partners and the system." Halladay-Schmant recognizes that for most YAB participants, it would be challenging to feel otherwise, given their life experiences. Even so, she says NWCEH members do their best to live up to their accountability commitment: "We try to do absolutely everything youth tell us they need related to homeless services."

"Before attending youth listening sessions, I would clear my mind, literally saying to myself, 'I know nothing,' in an attempt to leave my own assumptions about the system behind."

— Tina Allen, former Coordinator, Northwest Michigan Continuum of Care

Building bridges between youth-serving systems:

In 2019, the NWCEH conducted listening sessions to explore the issue of youth/young adults "aging out" of foster care into homelessness. Maureen Clore, who serves as a director with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services for Antrim, Charlevoix, and Emmet Counties, reflects, "My child welfare team came together with staff from Community Mental Health Services, homeless shelters, and other members of the NWCEH to discuss real-world examples when we collectively missed the mark for youth navigating between our systems. The stories were eye-opening for everyone." The group explored where and why gaps in care existed and designed actionable interventions, including a new Community System Liaison role for the Coalition.

Creating a Community System Liaison role:

"Since the youth homeless response system is so complicated, we needed a 'living index,' if you will, to make it more accessible to youth," says Tara DeGroot, who serves in the newly created Community System Liaison role housed at Goodwill Northern Michigan. DeGroot also works with

providers across other youth-serving systems to increase their collaboration and ultimately improve how their services are delivered to youth/young adults experiencing homelessness.

Building exit strategies out of homelessness:

Unless the service system builds and aligns around opportunities for permanent housing for youth/young adults, youth homelessness will not end. Thanks to an impact investment and capital grant from Rotary Charities, the NWCEH partnered with the Traverse City Housing Commission and Michigan Community Capital on the development of East Bay Flats,⁹ a workforce housing community. Fourteen units are now dedicated for formerly homeless youth/young adults.

"There was a long period when it felt like just a lot of talk about the things we were going to do. That feeling changed when the East Bay Flats were purchased to house formerly homeless youth."

— David Van Horn, former Youth Action Board Chair, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

Relational change (relationships, connections, and power dynamics)

Sharing power with youth/young adults: Creating a more equitable system requires involving those who are most affected by decisions not just in making them, but also in accountability spaces. Youth/young adults are empowered to be equal partners at the NWCEH table, contributing their perspectives on everything from creating goals to evaluating actions for the YHDP.

Using a charter to acknowledge lived experience as expertise:

The NWCEH created a charter for members to sign both in agreement that "lived experience is expertise," and as a signal of their commitment to dismantling inequitable power structures that stifle the voices of youth/young adults. Acting on the commitment—by, for example, making organizational changes based on feedback from youth/young adults—has not been easy for all

⁹ Available from: <https://michigancommunitycapital.org/projects-detail/?propid=28>

organizations. "We knew we would need to support providers across the youth homeless response system in listening to young people more deeply, empowering them to be the experts of their own experiences, and ultimately sharing power with them," says Halladay-Schmandt. The NWCEH's backbone staff invests significant time and energy in relationship building and education to strengthen members' accountability to their commitment.

"I continue to learn from people with lived experience about how to more effectively involve them in the work in a way that's not exploitative."

— Ashley Halladay-Schmandt, *Director, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness*

Transformational change (mental models)

Including youth/young adults in public-facing meetings: "Whenever we speak in public, we include youth partners—not to share their trauma history, but to speak about the work," says Halladay-Schmandt. With permission, NWCEH members bring recordings of youth/young adults sharing their perspectives when their involvement isn't possible. Based on the experience of numerous public meetings, Coalition members believe mindsets about youth/young adults who face housing instability begin to shift when adults take the opportunity to truly listen to the perspective of youth/young adults with lived experience.

Creating the conditions for changing hearts and minds: Engaging youth as key stakeholders has "forever changed many of us," reflects Halladay-Schmandt. Following the guiding principle "nothing about youth without youth" and empowering youth/young people to be equal partners in the work are creating the conditions for changing hearts and minds throughout the system in focus and within the broader community.

A change in context tests the system's resiliency

By 2020, most of the work described here was underway. NWCEH members were collectively building a more equitable and effective youth homeless response system and planting seeds for an even larger systems transformation around the issue of youth homelessness in Northwest Michigan.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

COVID-19 sent a shockwave through the system of youth homelessness, impacting the essential points of connectivity within the youth homeless response system and straining the Coalition's ability to advance its agenda. Degroot reflects, "COVID-19 did significant damage to the relationships between youth and social workers and school counselors across the region, especially with the transition to 'remote everything.'" It is exactly these relationships that rural communities like those in Northwest Michigan rely on to quantify youth homelessness and support youth/young adults in navigating the service system. "It was really hard," agrees Clore, noting that there weren't many youth/young adults moving in or out of the foster care system, a stagnancy that was far from normal.

Thankfully, the high level of collaboration and systems practice that defined the NWCEH's efforts over the preceding years strengthened the resiliency of the youth homeless response system and positioned the Coalition to recover lost ground. "Tara's role as Community System Liaison is so important now with the world opening up," Clore offers as an example. "She's supporting us in reestablishing connections among partners across systems."

Shared Infrastructure

Based on years of learning about other forms of support that serve as a foundation for multi-stakeholder collaboration, the NWCEH adopted the following infrastructure, applying the principles of collective impact:¹⁰

Aligned resources – “Through NWCEH’s distributed leadership structure, we aim to ensure that all of the funding our region receives for the work of ending youth homelessness is aligned and on target with our strategic plan and priorities—and that all projects are equitably designed with participation of youth with lived experience,” explains Halladay-Schmandt. Weaving together different funding streams in this way strengthens the NWCEH’s ability to carry out the Community Plan and more equitably and effectively serve area youth/young adults.

Backbone support – For some time, the NWCEH relied almost entirely on service-providing staff from member agencies to support the work of ending youth/young adult homelessness. “We learned that if you don’t have staff to advance systems change work—to literally call the meetings—then it’s just not going to happen,” Allen says emphatically. The NWCEH now provides backbone support for the

YHDP by guiding vision and strategy in partnership with the YAB Chair, acting as a convener, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding.

Committees and working groups – To complement the backbone support, equitably distribute power, and facilitate information flow, the NWCEH now has several leadership committees—including an executive committee, steering committee, and planning and partnerships committee, among others—working groups, and an engaged Youth Action Board, all of which center the voices and leadership of youth/young adults with lived experience.

Decision-making – Decisions within the NWCEH are made using a consensus model. The Coalition also uses a guide called Levels of Decision-Making for Youth¹¹ to engage youth/young adults in decision-making and reinforce a culture of respect and accountability.

Shared values – Members of the NWCEH share the values of accountability, collaboration, and a commitment to data-driven decision-making.¹²

Phase 4 - Learn and Adapt for Continuous Improvement



Foster a culture of learning to support ongoing adaptation and improvement, and adopt practices to regularly take stock of progress toward short- and long-term goals.

Fostering a culture of learning

A systems change initiative’s ability to adapt to changing contexts—no matter whether they arrive as a result of global pandemics or local elections—

seems to correlate directly with its relationship to learning. NWCEH members recognize the critical role learning plays in their collective sensemaking, adaptation, innovation, and improvement. They rely on the following activities, among others, to bolster their individual and collective capacity to advance their shared goals.

Trainings on systems change have proven to be helpful for building NWCEH members’ capacity for a new way of working. For example, A two-day training hosted by Rotary Charities with author David Peter Stroh on lessons from his book *Systems Thinking for Social Change*¹³ supported NWCEH members in building a shared understanding of

¹⁰ Kania, John, and Mark Kramer. “Collective Impact.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2011. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.

¹¹ Levels of Decision-Making for Youth. Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Youth Homelessness. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed01d42ee67267f4f242c48/t/635fece4161b1a5f3e0bdf14/1667230950520/Levels+of+dec.+making+for+youth.PNG>

¹² Available from: <https://www.endhomelessnessmi.org/about-us>

¹³ Stroh, David Peter. *Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015.

how change happens. Additional trainings on the collective impact model provided guidance on how to organize the Coalition's infrastructure for high-level collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

Upon receiving funding from Rotary Charities, the NWCEH was invited to appoint a Learning Steward to document the Coalition's learning journey and support members with skill building. Elaine plays the Learning Steward role and also participates in Rotary Charities' Systems Change Community of Practice, a facilitated space where practitioners engage in peer learning around common systems change challenges, such as measuring progress, communications and storytelling, and network health and well-being. NWCEH members also participate in a YHDP cohort, an additional opportunity for peer learning with communities across the country and technical assistance from HUD.

Allen notes that cultivating a systems mindset requires "constant practice." Halladay-Schmandt adds, "We're getting good at using consistent language," acknowledging how important both practice and consistency are for the challenge of maintaining a shared understanding among stakeholders when people come and go from systems work.

Ongoing evaluation

NWCEH members use a combination of evaluation practices to keep track of their progress toward short- and long-term goals, as well as their headway toward transforming the larger system central to the work of ending youth/young adult homelessness.

Through their involvement in the YHDP cohort, NWCEH members received support from HUD technical advisors in developing indicators for positive explicit structural change within the youth homeless response system. Indicators include the

number of youth/young adults transitioning into secure housing, for example, and the ability of youth/young adults to maintain their own housing once they secure it. The NWCEH's Continuous Quality Improvement Committee meets monthly to assess outcomes of the response system. As YAB Chair, Elaine's involvement in these meetings is crucial for sharing feedback from youth listening sessions and supporting adult partners in acting on it.

To complement the indicators of change, the NWCEH uses systems performance measures to assess the semi-explicit relational changes that contribute to ending youth/young adult homelessness, including collaborative partnerships among service providers from the youth homeless response system, as well as their partnerships with providers from other youth-serving systems, such as the juvenile justice, education, child welfare, and behavioral health systems.

Finally, to assess implicit transformational change within the system, YAB members provide the best source of feedback through their ongoing sensemaking at listening sessions. There, they reflect on how adult service providers and community members understand, respect, and equitably empower them, and discuss to what extent the youth homeless response system supports them in feeling more self-sufficient as they age. "Systems change isn't a one-and-done process. It's the recognition that the system will continually change over time. Our hope is that that system will continue to improve thanks to advising from the YAB," reflects DeGroot.

As a result of these evaluation practices and more, Halladay-Schmandt acknowledges that "The Coalition's shared awareness of the system and the problems contributing to it staying 'stuck' are ever-evolving."

Signals of change

The long play of transforming a complex system can be a challenging (and often frustrating) reality for everyone involved. "Change across our system doesn't happen overnight. That's something we struggle with," admits Clore. Even so, the NWCEH's learning and evaluation practices support members in identifying the signals of change that reveal how the system is transforming as a result of their and their partners' collective efforts.

After six years of mutual learning and constant iteration, providers across the youth homeless response system are now able to quickly identify the youth/young adults experiencing homelessness, assess their circumstances, and intervene to end their homeless experience in ways that are informed by youth/young adults with lived experience themselves. Thanks to these improvements, data updated monthly shows that there have been more *youth/young adults exiting homelessness* than entering it across the five counties served by NWCEH since April 2022. This means that, month-over-month, the coalition has achieved an average of "functional zero" youth homelessness.

Importantly, Halladay-Schmandt has also observed greater buy-in among service providers for listening sessions where they have the chance to learn from youth/young adults with lived experience. Van Horn confirms that he believes "young people are prioritized differently today" within the system. And even within the work to improve the adult homeless response system, service providers are now asking with greater intention and frequency what the recipients of services and programming need and want.

"We will always be committed to hearing from the people who experience the system and hold that above everything else."

— Ashley Halladay-Schmandt, Director, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

Looking Ahead

There is significant progress to celebrate as a result of NWCEH members' collaboration to advance their shared goals, most notably that the system, to use Halladay-Schmandt's phrase, "is inching closer to 'functional zero' youth/young adult homelessness." By focusing on opportunities for leverage and adopting new ways of working together, NWCEH members are demonstrating the power of a systems approach to create the conditions for transformational change.

It seems NWCEH's success can be attributed largely to its members' concerted effort to center the voices and leadership of youth/young adults with lived experience and to continually ask service providers from both the youth homeless response system and other youth-serving systems what they need from the Coalition to prevent and end youth/young adult homelessness. Clore acknowledges that this requires a commitment to working together, which begs the strategic question, "How can we continue to strengthen the connections and bridges between us and our services and programs?" A pertinent inquiry, especially only a few years after the COVID-19 outbreak.

As NWCEH members press ahead in the work of aligning programs and services around the common goal of ending youth/young adult

homelessness, Halladay-Schmandt says the next step is "to bring greater awareness to this way of working and to the work itself" in the hope of garnering more community participation. After all, Coalition members have heard time and time again that if just one person had been supportive of a youth/young adult, then that youth/young adult might have had the opportunity to change the trajectory of their life—and keep from falling through the cracks.

"Prior to this work, a homeless response system specifically for young people did not exist. We now have more people leaving homelessness than we have entering it—and we're seeing our system inching closer to 'functional zero' youth/young adult homelessness."

— Ashley Halladay-Schmandt, Director, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

For more information on this story, please contact Ashley Halladay-Schmandt at ashley@endhomelessnessmi.org.

Contributors

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Ashley Halladay-Schmandt – Director, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

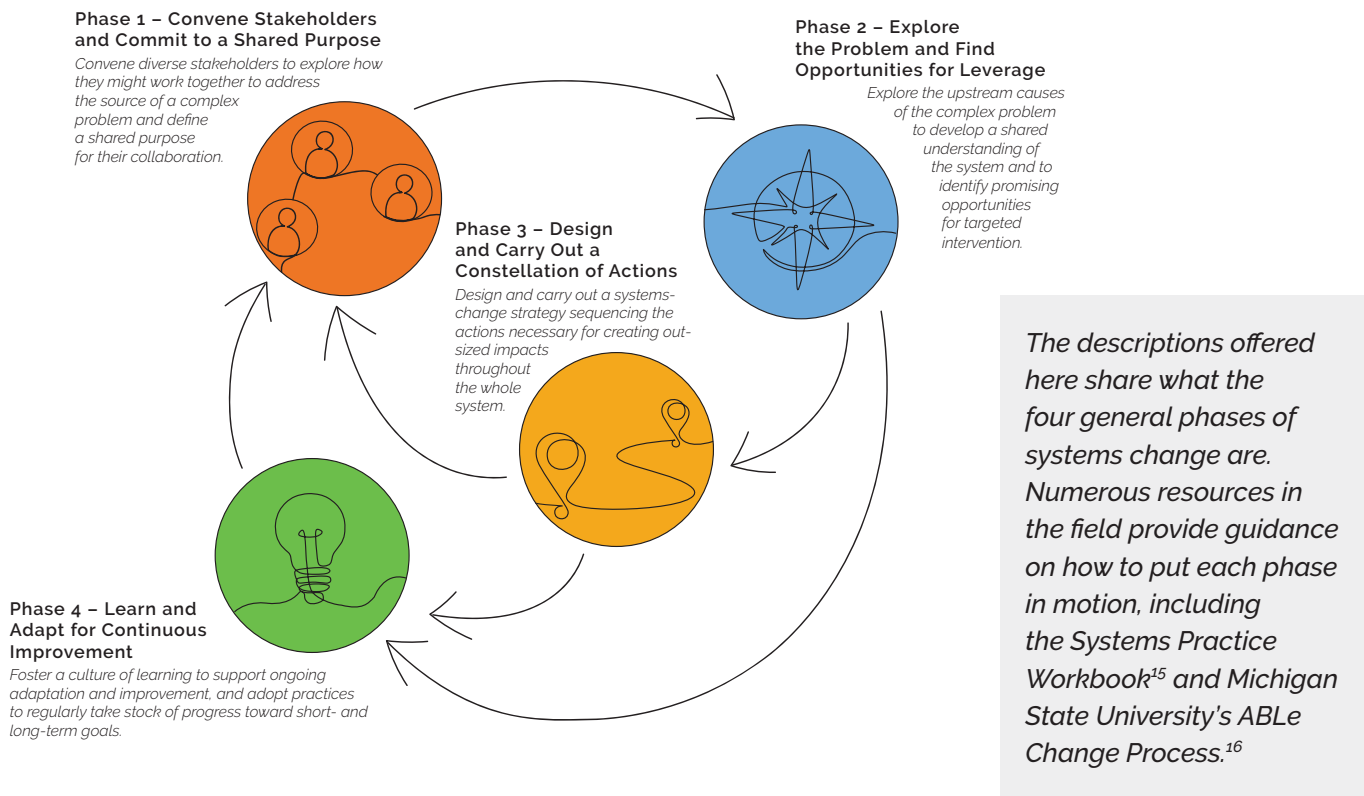
Appendix: Using a Systems Change Approach to Address Complex Community Issues

The work of solving problems like youth/young adult homelessness, food insecurity, and barriers to health and health equity is, inherently, a long game, and given the complexity of these challenges, no single organization will be capable of moving the needle on its own. It is essential to harness the collective power of a diverse group of individuals and organizations willing to commit themselves to *working together differently* and to *working on different things* to address the upstream sources of these challenges.

interdependent conditions that hold complex social and environmental problems¹⁴ in place. Taken together, the phases offer one (but certainly not the only) process that supports changemakers in making sense of the issues they seek to address and aligning their efforts to advance long-lasting change. Although they are presented as distinct and sequential, the phases of systems change weave together in practice to support an initiative's continuous improvement and adaptation in response to changing contexts.

Four phases of development commonly support multi-stakeholder initiatives in transforming the

Four Phases of Systems Change



¹⁴ Complex problems are defined by adaptive, interconnected, emergent, and non-linear qualities, which bring important implications for decision-making and strategy.

¹⁵ Systems Practice Workbook, 2017, <https://oecd-opsi.org/toolkits/systems-practice-workbook>

¹⁶ ABL e Change Process: Tools and Resources for Community Systems Change, Michigan State University,

[http://systemexchange.org/application/files/4515/9111/1141/ABL e_Change_Process_for_Community_Systems_Change_Tools_and_Resources.pdf](http://systemexchange.org/application/files/4515/9111/1141/ABL_e_Change_Process_for_Community_Systems_Change_Tools_and_Resources.pdf).

Phase 1 - Convene Stakeholders and Commit to a Shared Purpose



Building a foundation for systems change starts by connecting a diverse group of stakeholders to explore how they might work together to address the source of a complex problem. At their best, these groups include people with lived experience of the problem's consequences and people who bring institutional expertise with different approaches for addressing those consequences in different areas of the system at stake. Participants strengthen the foundation of their change effort when they tend to, and ultimately transform, the relationships between and among them to harness the group's collective power.

Defining a clear purpose is crucial for creating coherence across the group as the initiative takes shape; however it is held lightly and adapted with input from new participants in an ongoing process of co-creation, or "collective discovery."¹⁷ Equally important is the task of revisiting and revising the purpose over time as the context surrounding the issue changes.

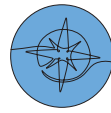
"Transforming a system is really about transforming the relationships between people who make up the system."

— David Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*

"All of the activities that go into creating a 'we' ultimately build an 'action system' which becomes the foundation for broader social change."

— Cynthia Rayner and François Bonnici, *The Systems Work of Social Change*

Phase 2 - Explore the Problem and Find Opportunities for Leverage



Addressing complex problems requires moving beyond band-aid solutions to explore the upstream sources of the problem that are creating downstream consequences. To locate the sources, the group must first set boundaries for exploring the system at stake. Then they must collect two sets of data, drawing from various sources. The first set focuses on how the problem currently presents itself in their community, exploring questions like: How many people experience it? Who experiences it most severely? What trends might have contributed to it over time? The second set focuses on how the system produces the problem: What policies, practices, and resources are at play? What mindsets are influencing the problem? How are they all connected? The group prioritizes collecting perspectives from individuals with lived experience of the problem while engaging and honoring multiple ways of knowing.¹⁸

This process helps the group create a shared understanding of the terrain in which they're working, including how they may unintentionally contribute to the conditions that create the need for the proposed initiative. It also helps them identify leverage points or opportunities for targeted intervention that can produce outsized impacts throughout the whole system. Leverage opportunities are typically found within the six conditions of systems change and the interactions between them: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models.¹⁹ This phase also sets the stage for the group to agree on visionary goals for the future state they want to create that will drive their collaboration.

¹⁷ Ehrlichman, David. *Impact Networks: Creating Connection, Sparking Collaboration, and Catalyzing Systemic Change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021, p. 105-110.

¹⁸ Perry, Elissa Sloane, and Aja Couchois. "Multiple Ways of Knowing: Expanding How We Know." *Nonprofit Quarterly*, 27 April, 2017. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/multiple-ways-knowing-expanding-know>.

¹⁹ Kania, John, et al. FSG, 2018, *The Water of Systems Change*, https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change.

Phase 3 - Design and Carry Out a Constellation of Actions



At this point, the challenge's breadth and depth become clearer. What's needed is a strategy sequencing the actions required to act on the leverage opportunities and advance the transformative change the group seeks to make. The group undertakes a collaborative planning process to design aligned and mutually reinforcing actions that facilitate learning and adaptation and that are, in some cases, carried out simultaneously.

In a more centralized initiative, actions are usually documented and carried out by smaller teams accountable to the group. In a more decentralized initiative, participants carry out actions in a more emergent way without a written plan or timeline. Initiatives often rely on other forms of shared infrastructure as needed—such as governance and participation agreements, communications platforms, and other resources—to support relationship building, enable information flow, unlock creativity, and strengthen alignment across the initiative toward shared goals.

“Meaningful collaboration both relies on and deepens relationship—the stronger the bond between the people or groups in collaboration, the more possibility you can hold.”

— adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*

Phase 4 - Learn and Adapt for Continuous Improvement



Fostering a culture of learning within a systems change initiative is crucial. Through ritualized activities, participants learn from each other's practices, amplifying what enables the desired change while stopping what inhibits it.

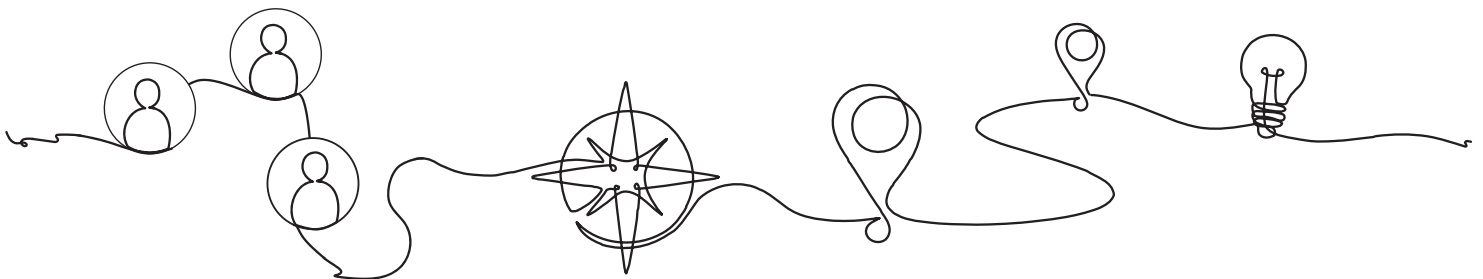
Many initiatives rely on a combination of practices to regularly take stock of progress toward their short- and long-term goals: using inquiry questions for ongoing sensemaking, embedding hypotheses within planned actions to create indicators of change at multiple levels, and capturing signals of change through the use of more traditional evaluation techniques and/or newer principles-based approaches designed to accommodate the characteristics of complex challenges.

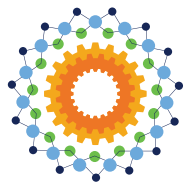
“Strategic learning is even more important once you realize that it is possibly the only outcome in systems change we can control.”

— Mark Cabaj, *Tamarack Institute*

“The key lever in a complex system is learning; the key methods are conversation, discovery, and experimentation.”

— Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston, *Simple Habits for Complex Times*





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