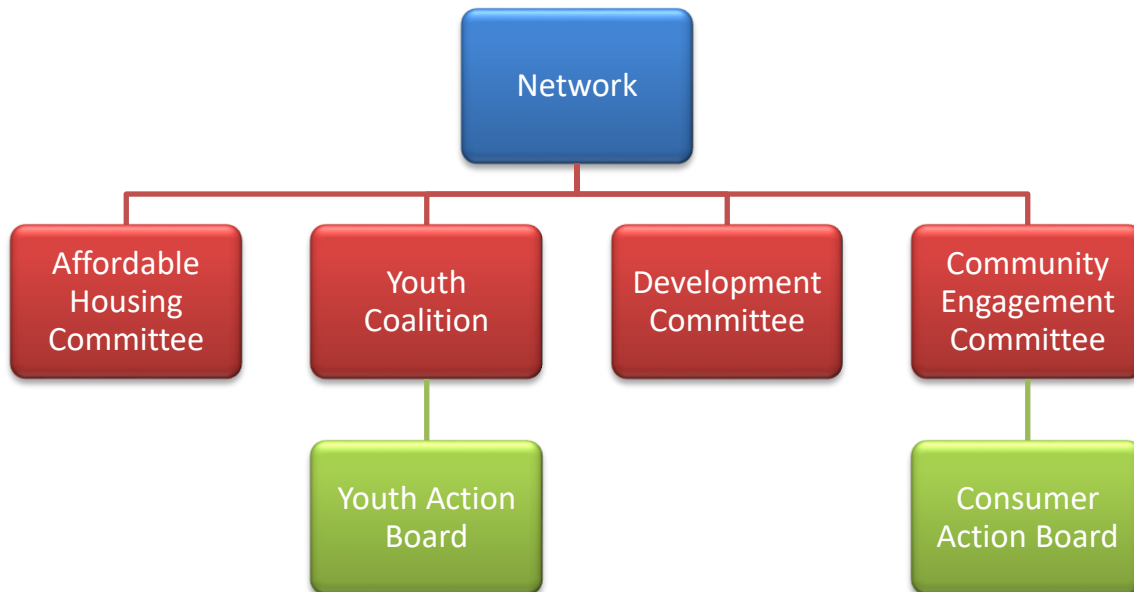# Homeless Network of Yakima County

Description

The Mission of the Homeless Network of Yakima County (Network) is to advocate for individuals experiencing homelessness in Yakima County in order to improve their quality of life, increase public awareness of the issues of homelessness, impact public policy and prevent and end homelessness. The Network is comprised of 62 members representing service providers, city officials and community advocates. The following Strategic priorities were identified through both retreat of those members and a survey that was administered to over 400 community members representing 27 sectors. The structure of the Network is based on these priorities:

1. Safe and Affordable Housing
2. Youth and Young Adults experiencing homelessness
3. Increased Case Management and Supports
4. Community Education and Awareness

In 2017, the Network engaged the community to open a Young Adult Extreme Winter Weather Shelter (YAEWWS) to ensure young adults ages 18-24 had a safe, warm place to sleep during the winter. This project served as a demonstration for creating pathways for community members to be an active partner is addressing homelessness.

The Network engages the community in two main ways; through inclusion in planning and the decision-making process and through partnership in providing a direct service.

Inclusion in planning: The Network originally began in 2004 as a provider Network which directed Federal, State, and Local Funds to various projects and initiatives.   Local shifts in infrastructure moved the management of these funds to an outside body. While the mission has not changed, the strategy to accomplish this mission has changed with a renewed focus on inclusion of community members. The

Network is currently staffed through local volunteers passionate about addressing the issues in partnership with community. Membership of the Network has expanded to include individual community members and organizations that are not homeless service or housing providers including the American Red Cross, Faith Based Organizations, Healthcare providers, and other community coalitions and networks.

Twenty-Five percent of each Network meeting, including committees, is devoted to continuing education to increase the level of understanding of these members who may be new to the housing arena. This ensures that community members who are involved in the local planning are informed, engaged, and aware of the various nuances related to addressing homeless issues.

Considerable effort has also been made to simply the pathway for involvement. This includes an interactive Web site http://www.homelessnetworkyc.org which contains resources and event information, multiple managed distribution lists for ongoing communication, and a strong social Media presence: https://www.facebook.com/thehomelessnetworkofyakimacounty/.

This commitment to community involvement was built into the Network's strategic planning – while current members attended a retreat to develop the strategic priorities described earlier, a survey was sent out to over 400 community members. While the current membership identified the strategic priorities – the specific strategies were prioritized by community members responding to this survey as demonstrated in the following table:

Strategic Direction prioritized by current membership	Strategies prioritized by the Community
Safe and Affordable Housing (Affordable Housing Committee)	Increase Safe and Affordable Housing – with a primary focus on the chronically homeless and Veterans
Youth and Young Adult Homelessness (Youth Coalition)	Improve access to emergency assistance, housing, and supports for youth and young adults
Increased Case Management and Supports (Development Committee)	Increase coordination of employment services with housing and homelessness assistance
	Co-locate, coordinate, or integrate health, behavioral health, safety, and wellness services with housing
	Provide guidance and tools regarding emergency shelter standards and operations
Community Education and Awareness (Community Engagement Committee)	Educate the public on the scope, causes, costs, and solvability of homelessness
	Reduce criminalization of homelessness by defining constructive approaches to unsheltered homelessness

Co-Designed solutions: The Network's first direct service project was the development of the county's first Young Adult specific Extreme Winter Weather Shelter for young adults ages 18-24. While cold

weather shelters have been a mainstay for the last few years – there had never before been a young adult specific shelter. Considerable effort was made to both involve the community in the design of the project and to use it as an opportunity to increase community awareness of youth and young adult homelessness. The end-result was a significant shift in program design with both guests and hosts reporting that they felt empowered and a sense of ownership in the project.

The issue of homelessness is a polarizing issue in our community. It is vital for the success of our programs to not only address the various misconceptions around homelessness, but to invite community members and consumers to the table to increase the sense of ownership in the project. The following methodologies were implemented to help ensure this involvement:

Methodology	Impact
Meet with the population we wanted to serve and identify their concerns	Young adults reported they often felt powerless in old structure. While safety and space policies were unmovable – the procedures for implementing those policies were designed by the young adults. This also resulted in a redesign of the entire project to be based on a Red Cross Disaster Shelter rather than a homeless shelter allowing for more dignity of services and personal empowerment. Finally, this feedback prompted a decision for this to be the first co-ed shelter, allowing couple to stay together for the first time in a shelter environment.
Meet with past volunteers and identify their concerns	Volunteers reported a need for additional training and supports and a shift in the power structure. This resulted in having the American Red Cross train all volunteers, renaming the volunteers as 'hosts' rather than 'monitors', and creating an operation manual and mechanism for ongoing updates based on feedback from both 'guests' (not clients) and 'hosts'.
Create a mechanism for built in peer support	The YAEWWS required 40 volunteer hours a day to operate. Feedback gathered early on prompted the development of a mechanism by which a community group could 'own' a night of the shelter. They would identify rotating groups of volunteers, trained and managed by staff, to ensure coverage for that night. This allowed families, church groups, and other units to serve together thereby increasing their comfort level. The number of volunteers increased by 4 times as a result with a total of 106 community members serving.
Becoming Community Funded	Past projects have relied on public funding – by becoming donor-driven for both operating costs and supplies, there was a mechanism for community members to be involved along various tracks; volunteer, join the planning, contribute supplies, or donate funds. There was also a decision to **not** do mass appeals for donations. This allowed 1-1 appeals and community group presentations which were fantastic educational opportunities. This project was 100% community funded with 48 groups donating over 7,000 items and 161 individuals and organizations donating over $30,000. This amount surpassed the need and was able to be banked for the next year's project.

Provide a constant feedback loop	The operations manual for this project was updated 6 times during the course of the project. Volunteers and guest were given a pathway for feedback and some policies and procedures were modified based on that feedback. This was incredibly empowering for the group as they could see the practical implementation of their involvement.
Conduct a post-mortem	At the end of the project – a post-mortem was conducted to identify potential issues with the current design. Issues were tracked and are currently being addressed in the design for this year's shelter. This allowed for participants to see the value of their voice and encouraged even more participation.
Acknowledge community participation	Within two weeks of the project there was a Community Appreciation event for all donors, contributors, volunteers, and partners. Each individual received a personal thank you letter from the Network and was acknowledged on our Web site: http://www.homelessnetworkyc.org/community-support.html Awards were also presented for those who went above and beyond including Star Donors, Partners, and Volunteers. Supporting volunteers was also vital for this seasonal project – effort was made to include other volunteer organizations at the Community Appreciation event to help provide a warm hand-off to other projects thereby showing their value to the community as a whole and not simply our project.

Addressing systematic inequities such as power differentials: The greatest power imbalance in an Extreme Winter Weather Shelter is between the guests (formally called clients) and the hosts (formerly called monitors). This imbalance potentially leads to power struggles between the two groups with volunteers either not showing up for their shift or not returning and unhappy guests. The YAEWWS intentionally set up a structure where hard decisions were outside of this normal dichotomy through developing an Operations Manual via a community process that both groups had input in, as well as a process for them to modify it. There was also an intentional shift in how the shelter was presented to the community via our partnership with the American Red Cross – the shelter was designed as a disaster shelter for community members in crisis and not as a homeless shelter.

There is an inherent inequity between those housed and those without a home. By using a Disaster Shelter as a model, it helped drive home the concept that both groups were community members with a similar need for privacy, comfort, and shelter. Volunteers were instructed to act as flight attendants – responsible for ensuring safety, but whose primary role was one of customer service. Extra supplies, snacks, clothing, was all provided as 'take what you need' and hosts were encouraged to identify additional needs not thought of. This removed the role of gate keeper from their job description making both them and the guests more comfortable. When hard decisions had to be made – such as a sanction from the shelter for behavior, they were made by the coordinator and not the volunteer in order to maintain that relationship.

Authentic Community Relationships: All individuals who played a role in the project were automatically included in the Youth Coalition Distribution list and invited to actively participate throughout the year. This provided continuity from the end of the project to other ongoing projects and acknowledged those community members as being more than simply a volunteer or a donor – but an owner of the project on

the same level as the Network members. Rather than requiring them to 'opt-in' there was an 'opt-out strategy where they were included by default. This helped to prevent community members feeling that their involvement was only for their donation or volunteer hours. After the project ended – they continued to be involved by being asked to weigh-in on other issues relating to young adult homelessness. What was worked best for the organization is to honor the experience of those who have been involved and to aggressively seek input to ongoing program design and planning.

Staff and Board contribution: The greatest contribution to the culture of community inclusiveness by board members was their contributions and commitment to the project. All board members (the Executive Committee) were donors to the project and 5 board members were active volunteers serving alongside their community members. While some staffing for the project was included in the project budget, 80% of the staff time was provided pro bono by both the Trainer, the shelter manager, and staff support by our local Youth and Young Adult Drop-in Center – Rod's House. The Network is staffed by a volunteer which made a huge impact on the community to show the leadership investment to ensuring success of the project.

Challenges: The most significant challenge in this project was sheer amount of volunteer hours needed to serve the population. Part of this was due to this project having a short start-up time. This challenge is being address by expanding on the model used moving forward and having more flexibility for groups to own nights of the week and beginning outreach earlier. Capacity was also a challenge in previous years with the time needed to develop the operations manual, develop the new processes, and train volunteers on a new model of delivering services and the reliance on pro bono time as being unsustainable long-term.

In closing, The Network is a community driven organization which sponsored a project that was community funded and community managed. This pilot project was a successful implementation of community engagement that continues to evolve with constant feedback. By being community driven – many challenges that would be present did not occur such as NIMBYism. The end result is that the Network is the community – as it should be. We are ever seeking to expand and include more voices and we all work together to address the lack of shelter in our community.