

A new approach to supporting the homeless in Eagle County

An influx of state and federal funding is transforming the way the county addresses homelessness

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Justin Fillmore helps his dog, Parker, stay dry from the snow in EagleVail in 2019. Fillmore came from Washington and said a person's current state of affairs doesn't represent who they are.

Chris Dillmann/Vail Daily

Homelessness has long been an underdefined and underserved issue in Eagle County, but that is beginning to change.

Up until this year, the county's ability to identify and support the local homeless population has been limited to the work of individual nonprofits and the sheriff's office, but new funding opportunities have enabled the development of the county's first organized program for homelessness services.

The Emergency Solutions Grant, distributed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, expanded funding during the pandemic to respond to the nation's growing need for housing assistance. Kim Bell Williams, executive director of the Eagle County Housing and Development Authority, saw that the eviction moratorium – which prevented people from being evicted from their homes from March 2020 through January 2022 – was expiring, and knew that its removal would require greater support for those struggling to retain their housing in the valley.

After applying for an ESG grant last year, Eagle County was awarded \$637,650 to launch the Homeless Stability Services program, headed by the former executive director of the Aspen Homeless Shelter, Monica Brutout. The grant was originally set to expire at



Up until now, nonprofits in the valley have been tackling different pieces of the puzzle on their own. For example, someone struggling with homelessness due to domestic violence could find resources at Bright Future Foundation, or someone driven from their home due to a flood, fire or other short-term emergencies could obtain support from the Salvation Army.

“Everyone was just doing a little bit, where it kind of touched what they did in their nonprofit, but there isn’t a formalized response to serving these folks,” Williams said. “So that’s what Monica and our partners have been working on.”

Since launching in March, the Homeless Stability Services program has created a centralized system for processing homeless cases in the county and connecting individuals with the right resources.

What does homelessness look like in Eagle County?

One of the primary goals of the program is to collect better data on what homelessness in Eagle County looks like, what resources it requires, and how prevalent it is. Williams said that it has been impossible to get a thorough record of the homeless population when the various resource providers are not connecting and sharing data, and it is hard to design an effective response program without that information.

“The challenge for us has been that we just haven’t been collecting and formalizing the data through the process that’s set up in the rest of the country,” Williams said. “That’s why that ESG grant focused on counties that didn’t have formalized services — understanding that to get in the pipeline for these dollars, you have to be capturing the numbers and reporting the data.”

Thus far, the program has assisted 32 individuals, around 75% of whom are considered full-time residents of Eagle County. These individuals fall under the program’s working definition of homelessness, defined as: “People who are currently living in a place not meant for human habitation or are at risk of losing evening residence within 14 days.”

There are transient homeless populations that are not looking to establish permanent roots in the area, and the resources to support these groups entail less comprehensive services — often just a check-in for immediate needs or a bus pass to the next location.

The Homeless Stability Services program provides these resources but aims to address the more complex needs of chronically homeless individuals who consider Eagle County to be their home. Brutout said that when she worked at the Aspen Homeless Shelter, she met many people who had the option to migrate to warmer climates during the cold months but chose to remain through the harsh winter weather.

“I would say that a lot of the population, in a sense, choose to be homeless in these mountain areas because they identify these areas as their home,” Brutout said. “They’ve been here for 30 or 40 years, and they’ve watched the prices in Aspen increase dramatically to the point where it’s not feasible for them to have a roof over their head. But from their internal emotional perspective, that’s what they call home, and so they’re really not willing to leave.”



Pam Cessna (center) with the Eagle Valley Community Foundation staff.

Courtesy photo

The ESG grant has enabled the county to finance a full-time street outreach engagement specialist, Pam Cessna, whose job is to be the first point of contact for homeless people seeking resources in Eagle County. Cessna, who started the role in May, registers individuals into the homeless management information system, assesses their needs, connects them with local organizations, and then remains in a long-term case management role with each individual, supporting them and tracking their progress up to a year.

She also spends time driving through Eagle County and checking in with people on the street to see if they want to be connected with the available resources.

“From my experience, in Eagle County, it’s a melting pot of people,” Cessna said. “It’s not a group of individuals, that I have encountered, where it’s the same across the board. It can be eviction, it can be addiction, mental illness — that tends to be loved ones who pass, and now money isn’t available so there’s nowhere to go. Those are people that I prioritize based on what’s happening.”

Cessna is working with the Eagle Valley Community Foundation and the Mobile Intercultural Resource Alliance, or MIRA, to connect with community members and meet them where they are at. She currently has a caseload of 12 people and works with them on a weekly basis to help build a path out of homelessness.

morning?’ – and that’s in a tent. Because if you can make your bed, you’re willing to get out of it.”

Challenges of a ‘housing first’ philosophy

The Homeless Stability Services program is designed around a “housing first” philosophy, which believes that putting someone in a stable home creates a foundation for them to make strides in other areas of their life and find stability.

“If you get the homeless population in houses... they will give back to the county taxes from them working, and become a working member of the community,” Cessna said.

The challenge is that this philosophy calls for reliable supportive housing that simply doesn’t exist in the valley. Supportive housing goes one step above open real estate, as it ensures that those with certain conditions are not turned away and incorporates case management and supportive programs in addition to the living space.

Catholic Charities has been the primary provider for homeless populations in the area for over 20 years, and regional director Marian McDonough explained the importance of having housing solutions that cater to the homeless population.

“A lot of times now with the (housing) vouchers that are out there, a landlord can say, this guy’s got bad credit – I’ve got 20 people in line, why should I accept this person?” McDonough said. “Permanent supportive housing will accept people with the idea that once they get settled and they have an opportunity to move towards having their life more stable in other areas.”

There are currently no permanent overnight shelters in Eagle County. Overnight stays typically occur through nonprofit facilitated hotel stays, which have a limited timeline and tend to be better suited for victims of short-term emergencies rather than chronic homelessness.

Garfield and Pitkin counties are the two closest to offer permanent supportive housing, but resources are limited. The Eagle County team is exploring creative solutions to fill this need, including the potential use of mobile vehicles and partnerships with community members, but no projects have been funded as of now.

With this reality in mind, rental assistance is one of the most powerful tools that nonprofits and the county can use to prevent homelessness before it begins, and has been a leading strategy at Catholic Charities.

“One of our big pushes all the time is not just to house people that aren’t housed, but how very important it is to *keep* people housed in our area because the housing market is so tight,” McDonough said. “If somebody loses their housing, the chances of finding something else to get them into is really limited.”

As more data is collected, project ideas and funding opportunities will increase in tandem. A new state grant program approved by the state legislature this spring has released an additional \$105 million to support homeless response programs, which Eagle County is now poised to access with its own program up and running.

“Just capturing the data is a huge victory for this year and that will bring more opportunities for services in the future, Williams said. “It’ll help us in so many ways, to kind of get to the next place where we can start thinking about whether it’s right to have a permanent shelter or not, or whether something more like a safe outdoor space is what our county needs.”

The Homeless Stability Services program will continue identifying new ways to address homelessness in the county and provide the long-term support necessary to make a lifelong impact.

“It is complex and it’s fascinating and it’s exciting,” Cessna said. “I have to meditate when I get home, otherwise I’ll stay here. I just want it to continue because it feels good to do the next right thing.”

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