



VIRGINIA PENINSULA

HOMELESSNESS STUDY



2025

Primary Authors

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Jonathan Danforth has over a decade of experience in rehousing individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness, improving crises response in encampments, and optimizing Coordinated Entry systems. As the founder and principal consultant at Viam Advising, Jonathan serves as a product advisor to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and subject matter expert to the National Alliance for Ending Homelessness (NAEH) and brings formal academic training in economics, background in data analysis, and deep experience implementing CoC projects. Jonathan founded Viam Advising as a vehicle for accompanying CoCs as they grow their homeless response systems. He is currently working with communities in Oregon, Arizona, Tennessee, Kentucky, Texas, and Virginia to optimize homeless response systems and transform the lives of those experiencing homelessness.

Shawn Griffith

Shawn has worked in the fields of social services, government, and academia with an overarching focus on homelessness for over 10 years. During that time, he held various roles ranging from direct service to homelessness researcher. Mr. Griffith has formal background and training as a cultural anthropologist. As a former street outreach worker and ethnographic researcher, he has extensive experience working with individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Additionally, he has experience performing direct service roles in multiple social work settings, including emergency shelters, drop-in centers, and residential treatment facilities. Mr. Griffith has experience building and strengthening Continuums of Care (CoCs) to increase resources and implement effective service delivery as the former Homeless Program Coordinator for the City of Knoxville.

Kaitlyn Davis

Kaitlyn Davis is an experienced public health researcher. She holds a Master's degree in Biomedical Science and a Master of Public Health degree with a concentration in Policy and Advocacy. She is a member of the American Public Health Association's Caucus on Homelessness and has experience synthesizing research to inform policy options. In 2022, she completed "The Qualitative Institute", a 3 day intensive training course hosted by the University of Pennsylvania and Thomas Jefferson University on the use of qualitative research methods. She has experience conducting interviews and focus groups, creating and disseminating surveys, and conducting thematic analysis of collected content.

About Viam Advising

Viam Advising is a consulting firm that helps communities transform local systems to end homelessness. Viam's approach is built on over a decade of insights, from boots on the ground experience to nationally recognized expertise, that has driven rehousing for over 35,000 households in Houston; and counting. Whether working with communities or individuals – Viam brings a specialized set of skills centered on accompanying our clients on their path, regardless of the starting point.

Acknowledgments

Viam Advising would like to thank the City of Newport News for their willingness to bring this study of the Virginia Peninsula to fruition. The intention to deeply understand the issue of homelessness on the Virginia Peninsula is commendable and will ultimately improve the lives of those most vulnerable. Viam Advising would also like to thank the City of Hampton, the City of Poquoson, the City of Williamsburg, James City County, and York County for their participation in the study. A holistic understanding of homelessness is not possible without your respective participation and collective action.

We are grateful to the Virginia Peninsula Homelessness Study Steering Committee and the Mayors and Chairs Commission on Homelessness for their dedication during the study's development. This Steering Committee was comprised of Virginia Blount-Moore, Tamara Temoney-Porter, Barbara Watson, Wendy Evans, Abbit Woodall, and Joy Cipriano. Your respective insights and hard work laid the groundwork for a successful study. In addition, a thank you to The Planning Council for the ongoing support with data collection and connections with homeless service providers. Your willingness to partner and share has made this study possible.

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Executive Summary

Throughout the Greater Virginia Peninsula, more than 2,000 people experience homelessness during the course of a year. While the Peninsula successfully drove down homelessness for a decade by investing in housing-focused responses to homelessness, the unhoused population throughout the region began to increase in 2021 and outpaced state and national averages by 2023. With an aging homeless population and one out of five unhoused people experiencing an acute health condition, the demands of the Greater Virginia Peninsula Homeless Consortium (GVPHC) have become increasingly complex. To identify recommendations for the Peninsula to successfully reduce homelessness once again, Viam Advising investigated the extent of homelessness, the efficacy of the existing homeless response system, and what additional investments would be necessary to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.



To answer these questions, Viam Advising conducted the Virginia Peninsula Homelessness Study — the first comprehensive study to use both qualitative and quantitative methods in the region on this topic. Guided by a steering committee composed of leaders from the City of Newport News, City of Hampton, James City County, City of Williamsburg, York County, City of Poquoson, and the Hampton-Newport News Community Services Board, and advised by The Planning Council, Viam Advising selected a technical team of service providers, local advocates, and persons with lived experience of homelessness who provided insights on findings and analysis throughout the course of the study.

The study was conducted from July to December of 2024, with 405 community members surveyed, 87 individuals engaged in community forums and focus groups, and 27 participants on our technical team. With this input from GVHPC stakeholders, Viam Advising has arrived at recommendations for re-shaping policies and programs of the homeless response system.

EXTENT & SCOPE OF HOMELESSNESS ON THE VIRGINIA PENINSULA

Viam Advising sought to understand the experience of homelessness from a range of perspectives. Input from interviews and focus groups was integrated with homelessness data analysis from GVPHC's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), the ForKids Hotline, and our community survey. The evidence conveyed that homelessness is primarily driven by an increasingly unaffordable rental market, and that those made vulnerable due to disabilities or who are a member of a racial minority group experience higher rates of homelessness overall. While it is evident that substance use disorder and serious mental illness exacerbate the challenges presented during a housing crisis, there was not substantial evidence that these issues are primary drivers of homelessness on the Peninsula. Salient findings include:

- ▮ **Homelessness is projected to increase on the Peninsula.** Calls for assistance from households experiencing literal homelessness are projected to increase by 15.75% annually, with overall call volume for assistance projected to increase annually by 11.93%, over the next three years.

- ▮ **Efforts to reduce chronic homelessness and unsheltered homelessness have stagnated.** Analysis demonstrates that rates of chronic homelessness and unsheltered homelessness are no longer in decline. In fact, the number of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness interacting with the homeless response system in a given year has increased year-over-year since 2019.
- ▮ **Newport News and Hampton have the largest of proportions homelessness in the region.** Together they represent a 464.52% greater rate of homelessness — a factor of 5.65 — than the northern localities combined, and account for 89.2% of calls for ForKids hotline assistance calls.
- ▮ **A disproportionate number of racial minorities, particularly black households, are experiencing homelessness on the Peninsula.** While Black individuals only make of 33.1% of the general population for the Peninsula, they account for 75.4% of the population experiencing homelessness. 62.2% of hotline calls for assistance come from black households — a rate that is five times higher than white households.
- ▮ **Rental housing cost inflation on the Peninsula has reached as high as 61% since 2019.** These increases have resulted in just under half of the Peninsula census tracts experiencing high rates (43% or greater) of housing cost burden. The highest increases in rent and home values were observed in the previously most affordable zip codes on the Peninsula.
- ▮ **Households experiencing homelessness for the first time are increasing at a greater rate than typical peer communities since 2020.** Housing cost inflationary pressures are driving households that have not previously experienced homelessness into housing crises. Moreover, analysis demonstrates an increasing trend of higher-income households seeking assistance from the FourKids hotline.
- ▮ **"Lack of affordable housing", "Fleeing domestic violence", and "Unemployment" cited as the top three causes of homelessness by persons with lived experience of homelessness on the Peninsula.** Leveraging perspectives of those who have experienced homelessness on the Peninsula is a vital component for decision-makers to make lasting changes to reduce homelessness. Decision-makers should invest resources in these cited causes for lasting reductions in homelessness.

IMPACT OF HOMELESS SERVICES

Next, the research team sought to understand the effectiveness of homeless services in the region. We analyzed system performance data from HMIS to understand the outcomes achieved, funding streams supporting the homelessness response system, and examined GVPHC bylaws that structure the CoC to gain insight on how the system operates.

- Greater rates of homelessness recidivism than a typical peer community suggests the need for expanded supportive services after housing to promote housing stability. While the Peninsula excelled at placing households in housing overall, it has underperformed when it comes to housing retention resulting in homelessness recidivism. This finding indicates either a mismatch between needs and eligible housing supports or a potential performance concern within the supportive services themselves.
- Cyclical interaction with the homeless response system is occurring. Households interacting with the system primarily exit to "Unknown" destinations and then return. This finding suggests that the re-housing system is not effectively moving households seeking assistance into housing to resolve homelessness.
- The majority of funding in the homeless response system is oriented towards housing solutions, but more funding is needed. While housing-focused interventions represent 57.09% of the programmatic investments, there have been minimal funding increases within the Continuum of Care (CoC) program over the last four years and pandemic-era funding, which constituted a 74.4% increase in funding capacity, is sunseting without any funding continuation plans in place. This leaves GVPHC with \$6,271,948 in annual recurring funding, and a gap of almost \$27 million needed to establish an optimal homeless response system that would have the capacity to bring an effective end to homelessness in the region.
- The homeless response system is hindered by needed changes to land use policies to increase housing options. A homeless response system can only function effectively if housing units are available for households to transition to. Currently, only 5% of the Virginia Peninsula is available to develop multifamily housing, with some localities having less than 3%. Newport News had the highest multifamily zones area on the Peninsula. Without strong efforts to increase housing density to combat inflationary pressures, the homeless response system will lack needed units to transition households out of homelessness into stable housing. The lack of housing availability and affordability was commonly cited by frontline staff as a barrier to re-housing efforts.
- The community has intimate knowledge of the homeless services available in their neighborhoods, but are not familiar with the Mayors and Chairs Commission on Homelessness or the Greater Virginia Peninsula Homeless Consortium at large. Focus groups with front-line staff, who provide homeless services, and with people who have lived experience of homelessness felt the Peninsula lacked a regional strategy, sharing that accessing resources and coordinating care throughout the Peninsula was onerous due to bureaucratic hurdles and the lack of system-wide coordination. Interviews with local officials reinforced this sentiment, indicating a belief that the homeless population is well engaged in services, but appear stuck in their current living situation due to lack of movement in the rehousing system – a system intended to organize and accelerate housing opportunities for those with the greatest needs.
- The diffuse leadership in the homeless response system's Lead Agency and CoC Board has hindered GVPHC's ability to make system-level decisions for the region. Discrepancies were observed between bylaw-delegated responsibilities for the Collaborative Applicant (Lead Agency) and CoC board versus what happens in practice. As a result, core responsibilities of the CoC are either duplicated across multiple entities or simply overlooked. Resulting contract execution lags, onerous residency requirements based on jurisdictional funding restrictions, lack of engagement with the philanthropic sector, and lack of confidence in the established re-housing process are all indicative of structural problems within the CoC.
- Broad support exists across all Peninsula localities for developing affordable housing and implementing new homeless services. Results from the community survey, public forums, and focus groups demonstrated broad support for developing affordable housing and implementing new homeless services to increase efficacy and efficiency of the homeless response system. The community survey demonstrated that this support existed within all the localities on the Peninsula.

LEADING RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Make structural changes that drive collective impact

- Establish System Transformation Plan
- Re-constitute and empower CoC Board
- Create strengthened Lead Agency
- Update CoC Governance Charter

2 Expand access to housing for households with the most barriers

- Re-constitute the coordinate entry system (CES)
- Implement street to housing strategy
- Create Landlord Liaison team
- Implement Master Leasing
- Delay emergency shelter investments

3 Fortify commitment to a regional homeless response system

- Commit all housing resources to CES
- Rapid exit to housing focus
- End CES workarounds

4 Invest in a regional financial strategy

- Regional funding alignment under shared vision
- Partner with philanthropy at systems-level
- Pool funding in centralized entity
- Establish regional flex fund
- Create regional landlord engagement plan

5 Pursue long-term housing solutions

- Alter zoning codes to increase density
- Create affordable rental development fund for each locality

6 Eliminate barriers to services and promote a client-centered culture, system-wide

- Develop written standards and policy/procedures that engender outcome-focused provider behavior
- Standardize training on trauma informed care, crisis de-escalation, motivational interviewing, and harm reduction

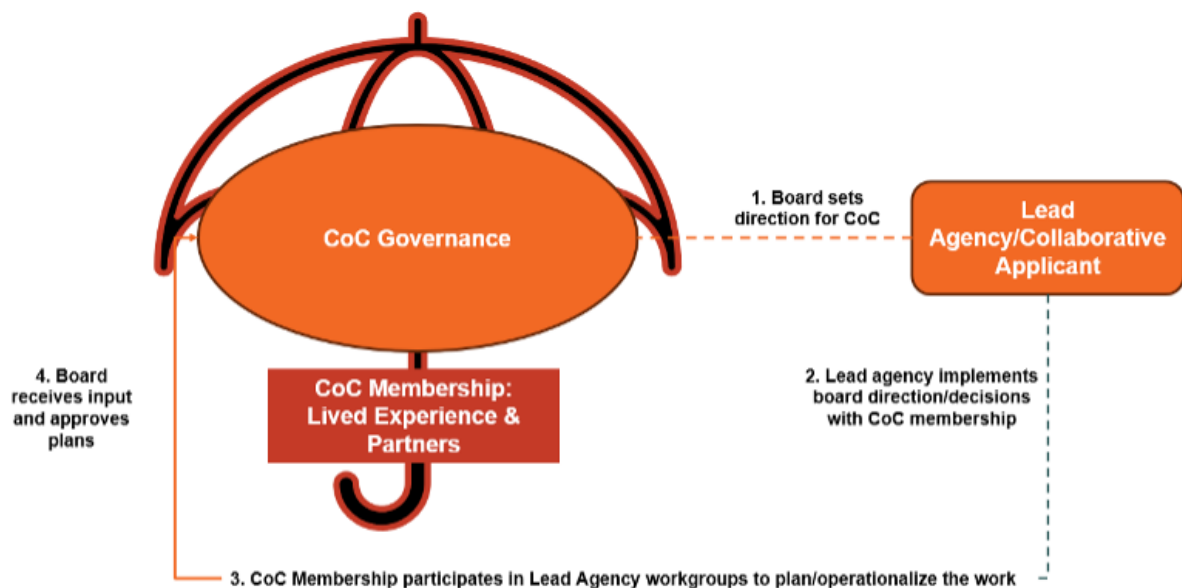
7 Develop an unsheltered response strategy to address homelessness holistically and to reduce punitive responses

- Create regional outreach strategy
- Maintain outreach coverage of entire Peninsula
- Implement progressive engagement approaches
- Prioritize broad stakeholder engagement to accelerate re-housing
- Consider coordinated encampment closure strategy

WHAT IS A SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION PLAN?

Before the Peninsula is positioned to make strategic investments that will bring about an effective end to homelessness or expand crisis housing, the GVPHC Continuum of Care must address the structural inefficiencies that are preventing existing investments from performing effectively. Establishing a "System Transformation Plan" takes stock of the roles and responsibilities of those governing the CoC and charts a path for equipping the CoC to achieve collective impact as a high-functioning homeless response system. These structural changes should be completed before introducing new financial resources or programs to the system.

Foremost, an impactful system will require an empowered CoC board to hold the vision for a regional response and drive system-wide efficiencies. The CoC board should be composed of system-level power brokers who can set a bold vision for addressing homelessness on the Peninsula and garner necessary resources to execute said vision. The CoC Board will provide authority to a Lead Agency through the CoC charter and reinforce the role of the Lead Agency in their respective systems.



Optimized CoC Governance Structure

For this transformation, the CoC Lead Agency needs to be redefined as the central backbone or organization of the homeless response system. As depicted in "Optimized CoC Governance Structure" chart, this organization is tasked with carrying out the vision of the CoC board – to align resources from adjacent systems, convene the members of the GVPHC to advance collective goals, and hold homeless services funding recipients accountable to a shared vision for the Peninsula.

To provide effective presence and leadership for the GVPHC, the Lead Agency would ideally be local to the Peninsula, a 501(c)(3) non-profit who can develop philanthropic support for the system, and have the organizational capacity to serve as the fiscal agent for the CoC. Realigning its governance structure will allow the GVPHC to implement a housing-focused strategy that centers on increasing access to permanent solutions for those experiencing homelessness and at-risk of homelessness.

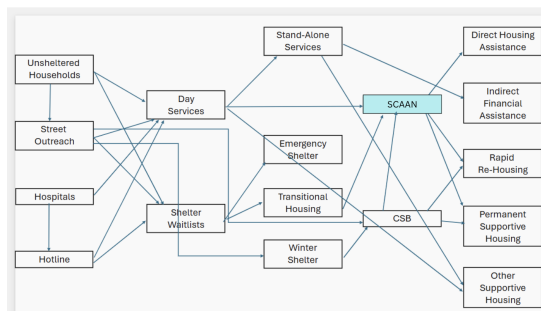
Re-constituting the Coordinated Entry System (CES), locally known as SCAAN, as the centralized re-housing process for the CoC will also be critical to rendering a successful system transformation. CES is intended to prioritize resources by matching households with programs that will provide appropriate levels of support to stabilize individuals in housing, but without the leadership and vision from the GVPHC, homeless service providers and unhoused program participants alike lack confidence in CES. Re-constituting CES will require shared vision and commitment across CoC partners to operationalize CES for maximum impact.

WHAT IS RE-CONSTITUTING THE COORDINATED ENTRY SYSTEM?

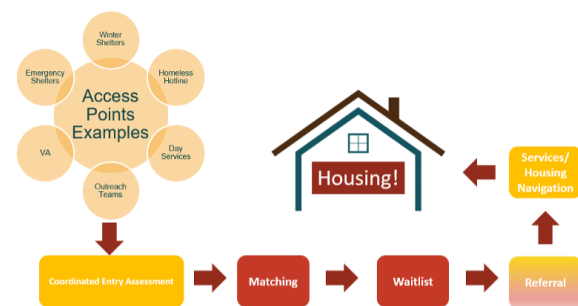
While CES is fundamentally intended to accelerate access to re-housing resources, the SCAAN process is currently prohibitive. Limited accessibility for clients, a disjointed set of housing resources in the community, and over reliance on case managers for resource matching have resulted in added friction instead of increased efficiency.

CES is intended to streamline the work of identifying housing by matching households with the resources they are eligible for and then prioritizing based on need. While the ForKids hotline provides a clear first step for service seekers on the Peninsula, the SCAAN process requires multiple steps at different locations just to activate resource matching. To increase accessibility and reduce assessment time, the CES assessment should be reconfigured for front-line staff, such as street outreach workers, to conduct as a single interaction while operating in the field.

Several organizations have established supportive housing programs that do not require their incoming clients to move through SCAAN due to current system inefficiencies, as seen in "Current GVPHC Rehousing Pathways" chart below. These alternative paths are perceived as a benefit to organizations and households in need. In reality, these alternative paths undercut the SCAAN process and prevent these resources from serving the those with the highest service needs who often have the most barriers to housing and whose experience of homelessness has the greatest impact on the community's emergency response resources and public spaces. The GVPHC will need to invest, both structurally and philosophically, in achieving an optimized rehousing system by closing all alternative pathways in this process.



Current GVPHC Rehousing Pathways



Optimized CES System Workflow

The "Optimized CES System Workflow" chart demonstrates best practice for an effective Coordinated Entry process. The current SCAAN process is facilitated as a biweekly conference call where households are presented by case managers with the hope that they will match with an eligible housing intervention. This kind of case conferencing creates unnecessary delays in the rehousing process and requires case managers to navigate system resources that should be matched automatically through the SCAAN process. Rather, SCAAN should inventory all available housing interventions and match them with eligible households on a daily basis. This allows conference calls to be reoriented to address the actual housing barriers, such as locating units or obtaining necessary documentation.

With a structurally sound board, strong Lead Agency, and effective SCAAN process, the GVPHC will be positioned to efficiently match household needs with the appropriate services, accelerate exits to housing, and increase housing retention throughout the region. These three outcomes are considered key performance measures by HUD and will improve the likelihood of increasing and sustaining federal funding in the future.