

# The Next Chapter of Change:

## From Ending Youth Homelessness to Addressing Chronic Homelessness in Northwest Michigan

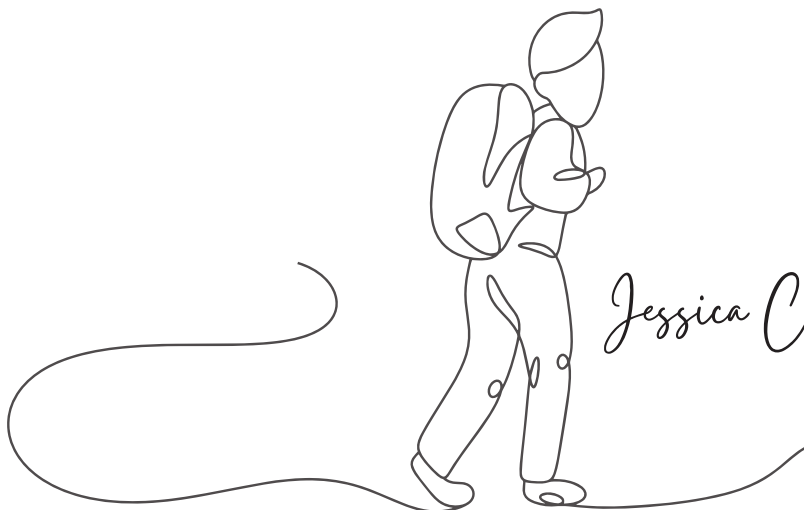
*This story shares an update on how the Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness (NWCEH) has continued its work to prevent and end youth/young adult homelessness over the two years since the systems change initiative was originally spotlighted in the publication **Stories of Change: How a Systems Approach is Transforming a Region.***

"Through our work with youth, we learned about centering the voices of people with lived experience, and that's really changed everything."

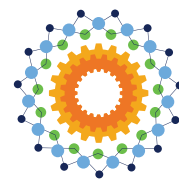
— Ashley Halladay-Schmandt, Director, Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness

"We're changing the conversation from what we need to do better to what we might need to do differently together. Going through that process with youth encouraged us to be open to the idea that we can change systems."

— Dan Buron, CEO, Goodwill Northern Michigan



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# Introduction

By January 2023, the Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness (NWCEH) had achieved “functional zero” youth/young adult homelessness across five counties in Northwest Michigan—meaning more youth were exiting homelessness than entering it. This success was the result of a coordinated community approach involving 18 organizations and agencies that centered the voices of youth with lived experience, strengthened connections between youth-serving systems, and created an equitable and resilient homeless response system specifically for young people, a community asset that had never existed before.

The steadfast commitment of the NWCEH members who united behind a shared vision to make youth/young adult homelessness rare, brief, and one-time and worked together in different ways to advance a systems change approach made enduring change possible. The evolution of their multi-partner initiative and its successes were originally shared in *Stories of Change: How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region*.<sup>1</sup>

What follows is an update on the NWCEH’s work between 2023 and 2025, providing insight into how Coalition members are sustaining functional zero youth/young adult homeless and how this experience has positioned them to apply the lessons learned, practices, and collaborative infrastructure developed through their systems change initiative to an even more complex challenge: ending chronic homelessness in the Greater Grand Traverse Area by 2028.

*The Northwest Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness defines chronic homelessness as a condition in which an individual has been experiencing homelessness for a year or longer and also has a diagnosed disability.*

## Sustaining functional zero youth/young adult homelessness

With youth/young adult homelessness in the five-county service area holding steady at functional zero for two years, NWCEH Director Ashley Halladay-Schmandt comments confidently that the system is now operating the way the Coalition intends it to operate. Importantly, the system includes not just the explicit programs, services, and professionals that serve youth/young adults who face housing instability but also the implicit ways the community responds to them. In its current state, this broad, deeply interconnected system continues to produce positive outcomes: in 2024 alone, 35 youth/young adults experiencing homelessness gained access to housing.



Halladay-Schmandt and fellow NWCEH members attribute their ability to maintain the transformed system state to several enabling conditions. First, Dan Buron, CEO of Goodwill Northern Michigan, points to ongoing practice with “difficult conversations and respectful accountability” contributing to **strong relationships** among Coalition members. Nora Dunlop, Director of Housing Development at Goodwill Northern Michigan, adds that partnerships with youth-serving systems like juvenile justice, education, social services, and foster care have also been critically important to sustaining functional zero youth/young adult homelessness. The quantity and quality of connections across the system continue to ensure that vulnerable youth/young adults receive **coordinated support**.

<sup>1</sup> Available from: <https://www.rotarycharities.org/stories-of-change>

Halladay-Schmandt also notes a **changing community narrative** around youth/young adult homelessness, signaling a mindset shift in how people perceive youth with lived experience. "Many times when folks from the community give public comments at city commission meetings, we hear things like 'Everyone deserves housing,' or 'Please don't criminalize homelessness because housing is the solution to homelessness'—things that we say as a Coalition." These new narratives are challenging existing mindsets, expressing alternative values, and promoting new ways of understanding the issue of homelessness.

Finally, **sufficient resource flows** remain a crucial condition for maintaining this progress. "If we had not received funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, we simply would not see these results with youth/young adult homelessness," admits Halladay-Schmandt. She goes on to suggest that significant changes in the federal funding landscape would inevitably impact NWCEH's ability to continue its work with youth/young adults and to serve adult populations as well.

*"I don't have to spend as much time convincing people that they should care about homelessness anymore. They just care, which means we can focus on what I would consider more fruitful conversations about solutions."*

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

## Shifting the focus to chronic homelessness

NWCEH's continued success with youth homelessness created a powerful foundation for broader systems change. As the Coalition's confidence grew alongside their experience with a systems approach, members began to recognize how it could be adapted to address another

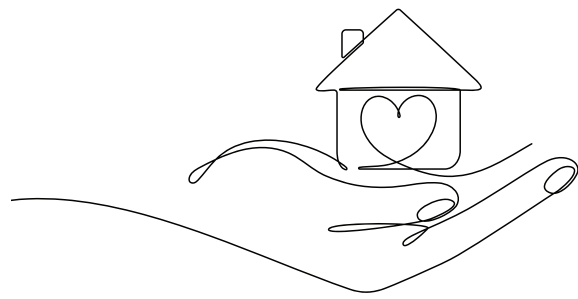
persistent challenge. The relationships they had fostered, the shared infrastructure they had built, and the systems-level understanding they had gained—all of these assets could now be leveraged toward a new goal. In 2023, as they celebrated maintaining functional zero for youth/young adult homelessness, NWCEH members made a strategic decision to expand their focus, setting their sights on ending chronic homelessness in the Greater Grand Traverse Area by 2028.

Shortly after this decision, public attention on the problem of homelessness peaked. The City of Traverse City pruned trees on a homeless encampment on public property known as The Pines. The maintenance was intended to improve access for police and emergency responders and reduce fire danger, but it also made the encampment much more visible to the public, bringing new attention to the problem.

As community attention shifted toward the urgent need for year-round shelter, NWCEH and its partners recognized the importance of integrating this priority into their existing mission to end homelessness through housing. This expanded focus created a new sense of urgency, mobilizing citizens to act and advocate in ways the region had not seen before. NWCEH members quickly adapted by intensifying support around the more immediate components of the homelessness response system—without losing sight of long-term solutions like Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). Funding partners including the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation and Rotary Charities of Traverse City also increased their support to help convene an ad hoc collective of over 20 collaborators, who notably represented a diversity of viewpoints. Together, the group explored options and eventually advocated for and secured the public funding and zoning needed to expand a seasonal shelter to a year-round operation for two years.

With this new level of public will, momentum, and commitment among community members,

Halladay-Schmandt asserts, "Now it's time for NWCEH to solve for more than just shelter," again signaling the Coalition's commitment to securing long-term solutions for chronic homelessness.



## Applying lessons learned to chronic homelessness

A primary lesson that NWCEH members are carrying forward from their youth/young adult homelessness initiative is the critical importance of centering the voices of people with lived experience and shifting power into their hands. In 2023, the NWCEH undertook a restructuring process that included inviting individuals with experience of homelessness to contribute to policy and decision-making. "We've contracted a person with lived experience to serve on our board," Halladay-Schmandt shares, noting the Coalition's intention to designate and resource up to five similar board seats. The current board member uses her expertise and experience to help lift up the voices of people NWCEH serves through hosting listening sessions and sharing feedback with the board. Additionally, NWCEH has invested in building members' collective capacity for ethical, systems-based storytelling that honors individual voices while connecting their experiences to the broader systemic context.

NWCEH has also established a task force of regional partners that will develop systems change strategies, policies, and partnerships that promote long-term solutions to chronic homelessness, such as PSH. The task force presents an opportunity to invite new partners into the fold: "To respond to chronic homelessness, we need new collaborative relationships with the city and county government and specifically with the police and sheriff," notes Halladay-Schmandt.

*"Ending chronic homelessness will take a community-wide effort...it can't be done by just three or four institutions."*

— Nora Dunlop, Director of Housing Development, Goodwill Northern Michigan

## Signs of change toward ending chronic homelessness

NWCEH's concerted collective efforts are already producing concrete results. In 2023, Goodwill Northern Michigan closed on the purchase of East Bay Flats, increasing the total number of dedicated PSH units by about 50%. This enabled the NWCEH to house over 60 of the 70 individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in 2024.

Equally significant has been the unprecedented financial support from local government. In 2024, the City of Traverse City allocated over \$300,000 for PSH at East Bay Flats, while Grand Traverse County committed over \$200,000 for PSH with Northwest Michigan Supportive Housing. "This is a monumental shift," reflects Buron, as neither entity had ever previously made financial investments in PSH. Ryan Hannon, Director of Outreach with Central United Methodist Church and NWCEH member adds, "These additional partners coming together—the city, the county—I think it's a testament to the systems change work."

While gaining momentum in addressing chronic homelessness, the NWCEH hasn't abandoned its youth programming. Halladay-Schmandt explains, "If we can end homelessness for the two most vulnerable populations, everyone else will be able to flow through the homeless response system better," demonstrating how targeted interventions for specific populations improve the entire system.

Traced across time, it's clear that the Coalition's success is not the result of a single strategy or breakthrough, but of steady, intentional work by many people across many levels of change. Deep community impact can be connected to things like mindset shifts, strengthened relationships, and new policies and public investments. The following table below offers a snapshot of how the system has evolved, from early efforts to end youth homelessness to today's expanded focus on chronic homelessness.

## Individual + Collective Transformation

*Mindset shifts, skills, culture, alignment, shared purpose & collaboration*

- 8+ organizations aligned to end youth homelessness
- Built cross-sector trust and shared accountability
- Strengthened capacity for systems thinking and co-design
- Shifted from a mindset of temporary relief to one of systemic justice
- Set new shared goal to end chronic homelessness by 2028
- Deepened commitment to power-sharing and ethical storytelling
- Elevated leadership of people with lived experience
- Expanded partnerships to include government and law enforcement
- Created a government, philanthropy, and Coalition-led Task Force to design a plan to end chronic homelessness

## System Transformation

*Changes in power, policies, practices, relationships, resource flows*

- Created new housing pathways centered on youth voice
- Implemented the area's first homeless response system for youth through HUD funding
- Improved data-sharing and system coordination
- Embedded lived experience in governance and decision-making
- Secured the region's first local public investments in supportive housing from the city and county
- Helped shift policies and land use to expand year-round shelter access

## Community Impact

*Observable progress on the issue*

- Achieved and maintained functional zero youth/young adult homelessness across 5 counties
- Increased permanent supportive housing by 50%
- New urgency and political will to solve long-term homelessness
- New public narratives reduced stigma
- 35 youth and over 60 individuals experiencing chronic homelessness housed in 2024

While real progress has been made, challenges remain. The Coalition's ability to sustain and build on this momentum will depend in part on continued public will and stable funding, especially as changes in federal policy and support create new uncertainty. Still, the story of NWCEH offers a hopeful view of what becomes possible when communities stay in relationship, center lived experience, and continue learning together.

## For more information on this story, please contact:

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## Contributors

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