

# HOW TO GOVERN GEOGRAPHICALLY DIVERSE COCS? LEADING BY PROVIDING A REGIONAL VOICE

## INTRODUCTION

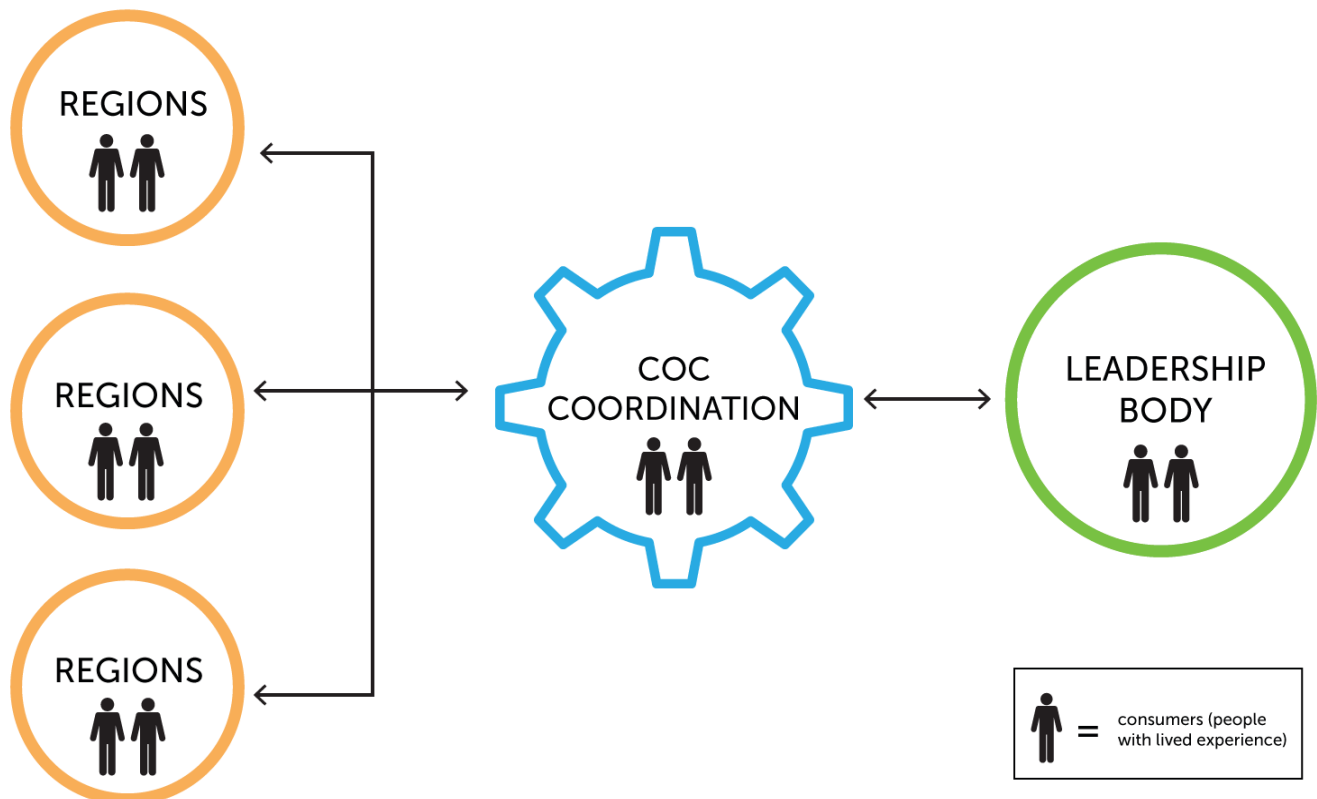
Continuums of Care (CoCs) that span large and diverse geographies, including cities, suburbs and rural communities, often contend with two big challenges:

- **Regional autonomy:** How do CoCs provide local and regional autonomy while also retaining centralized direction and leadership?
- **Regional diversity:** How do CoCs manage diverse regional needs and varying levels of regional capacity within the geography?

Geographically diverse CoCs must govern and plan as a cohesive CoC while also balancing regional autonomy and meeting varying needs by region. CoCs are better equipped to address these challenges when they conduct their governing and planning at both the central and regional/local levels and coordinate their planning between these different levels:

- **Central Leadership and Governance:** The CoC's central leadership body (the board or comparable entity) ensures the mission of ending homelessness is advanced throughout the CoC. The leadership body establishes and oversees a clear governance structure that fosters efficient, transparent decision-making processes to propel strong system performance. Leaders from the regions are a critical part of this leadership body, and the CoC's regional planning groups feed into the central CoC planning and governance.
- **Regional Leadership and CoC Planning:** System planning and system change work happens at both the central CoC leadership level and regional levels, and the regions are important partners. Regional leadership informs central decision-making and helps identify regional needs and implement regional planning. Additionally, CoC planning staff, working closely with regional partners, may provide staff capacity to help carry out these strategies within each region.

In both levels it is critical to include people with lived experience. Regionally diverse CoCs strive to gather input from people who've experienced homelessness (consumers) and to infuse these key stakeholders into CoC policy and practice design at the central and regional levels. (More on this on [page 3](#)).



## CRITICAL ELEMENTS FOR STRATEGICALLY LEADING COCS

### I. COC LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

*The CoC's Leadership Body sets a clear mission of collaborative planning and system change to end homelessness and it establishes a governance structure to lead the CoC and involve regions in decision-making.*

#### **Define a Clear Leadership Structure to Guide the CoC:**

The Leadership Body defines the CoC structure and regional involvement. It clearly delineates the following in a governance charter:

- CoC roles and responsibilities and how regional voices are included;
- Committees and how regions are represented within committees;
- Ways committees can leverage each other's work to improve system performance; and
- Decision-making processes and how input and voting by regions is considered.

#### **Establish Regional Planning Groups to Serve as Part of the CoC Structure:**

Geographically diverse CoCs often divide their geography into multiple regions; each conducts its own planning and feeds into the centralized leadership structure. Regional boundaries may be based on historical partnerships or how people experiencing homelessness seek housing and services.

CoCs have different names for these entities: regional planning groups, homeless planning regions, local service delivery areas or even "local CoCs." Regardless of their name, they share common characteristics: 1) they meet regularly (i.e., monthly or several times a year); and 2) they incorporate a range of diverse stakeholders in their planning efforts, including people with lived experience of homelessness, homeless housing/ service organizations, local government, providers of mainstream resources, philanthropy, business and faith-based organizations. The CoC may set standards for regional planning groups to have a certain structure so that regions effectively contribute to the overall CoC. Each region may even have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the CoC about expectations.

#### **LEADERSHIP**

Rural regions too small or with too few stakeholders to sustain homeless planning groups may combine these activities within a broader community services coalition, which can be an effective way to manage limited staffing.

#### **Establish Regional Representation to Serve on the Leadership Body:**

CoC leadership bodies of regionally diverse geographies typically include at least one-to-two representatives per region, with each regional planning group

choosing its representatives. Often CoCs give each region an equal number of seats on the CoC's Leadership Body, regardless of geographic size or homeless census, to promote a guiding principle that all regions are working together to end homelessness across the entire geographic area of the CoC. CoCs usually have a mechanism to add regions if the geography changes and to recruit new leadership members due to turnover in CoC regional representatives.

#### **LEADERSHIP**

Online voting for time-sensitive CoC Leadership Body decisions or formal votes by regions only for major issues allow CoCs to move decisions forward and still get regional input. The key is regular communication and a feedback loop between regional planning groups and CoC Leadership.

#### **Create a Flexible Governance Structure to Balance Diverse Regions:**

Geographically diverse CoCs may have a broad range of regions, some rural, some urban. By putting in place well-defined governance structures that include the regions and respond to their varying capacity and needs, the CoC's leadership body can help ensure that all of these regions are represented, have a voice in decision-making, and participate in the distribution of CoC planning work. With clear processes and flexible governance structures, even very diverse geographies can function together as one cohesive CoC.

CoCs successfully include different regions with varying staff capacity and resources in different ways. Some CoCs establish reserved seats on committees and the Board that represent specific types of communities such as rural or suburban. Others create subcommittees or working groups that focus on the planning needs of communities with similar features such as a rural subcommittee. By bringing these types of communities together, the CoC can ensure that their concerns and ideas are heard.

### II. REGIONAL LEADERSHIP AND COC PLANNING

*At the regional level, CoCs may carry out CoC-wide planning by encouraging regional autonomy and regional leadership while also building staff planning capacity.*

#### **Encourage Regional Autonomy within a Structured CoC Process:**

Fostering regional autonomy can help to strengthen a CoC's planning. When regional planning groups meet regularly, identify needs, track system performance, and feed input and decisions into the central CoC's leadership body through regional leadership, then the CoC's planning will reflect the needs of the entire diverse CoC.

#### **Build Capacity to Coordinate and Conduct CoC**

**Planning Work:** CoCs may staff their planning work in a variety of ways, recognizing that resources for staff may be limited. The Collaborative Applicant may provide the staff or contract this role to a nonprofit planning organization, consulting group, or other entity. Often CoC planning funds are used to

cover these costs, but available funding doesn't always cover staffing. Other options CoCs may consider are to fund planning capacity from state or municipal agencies, or philanthropy. In some CoCs when resources are too limited to hire additional staff, board or committee members may help provide a coordination role. Part of building effective CoC planning capacity is also ensuring that this staff coordinates well with regional partners and integrates regional planning into the implementation of CoC-wide strategies.

**Use Coordination to Strengthen the Capacity of Regions to End Homelessness:**

A critical element of advancing system change is strengthening the capacity of regions to implement efforts to reduce homelessness. Advancing the CoC's strategic direction requires building partnerships both within and across regions. CoC staff not only monitor projects for compliance, but they provide training, share data and outcomes by region, and offer technical assistance to promote improved outcomes to end homelessness. The CoC may even integrate and strategically use CoC funding and other homeless resources as it builds the capacity of regional partners to end homelessness across the entire CoC. Ideally, this work includes face-to-face time engaging with regional planning group stakeholders, attending their meetings, and conducting training and presentations in each region.

Some critical elements to consider when building CoC planning capacity include:

- **Systems Performance Measures:** HUD's goal to improve outcomes by tracking System Performance Measures (SPMs) offers an opportunity for CoC leadership to engage regional members and improve their performance. Some CoCs set separate SPM goals for each region (e.g., reduced lengths of homelessness, fewer returns to homelessness) based on the housing and services available in and unique circumstances of each region. Regions enter their program data into HMIS, and the CoC then shares both CoC-wide and regional data with them so the regions can see trends and measure their progress. The CoC, working with each region, may set SPM expectations, but CoC leadership communicates with the regions about their performance, listens to them about regional challenges, and uses this process to build regional capacity and address local needs through training and technical assistance.

**PLANNING & COORDINATION**

Rather than dictate service activities, the CoC may ask regions to design how they will achieve reduced lengths of homelessness, fewer homeless entries, and fewer returns — and then fund regions for achieving these outcomes.

- **Technology:**
  - » A **CoC website** can be an important tool to inform all regions of work within regions, between regions, and across the CoC's entire geographic area. Examples

of website materials to drive planning may include strategic plans to end homelessness, the CoC's adopted governance charter, coordinated entry policies and procedures, minutes from leadership meetings, and action plans from committees.

- » **Video/web conferencing, webinars, listservs, and social media platforms** are commonly used by CoCs covering vast geographies for meetings, training and other planning activities to promote participation among stakeholders and to encourage networking.

- **Funding:** Several CoCs have created rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing projects using tenant-based rental assistance that serve several regions in the CoC geography. Such projects ensure that rural or other areas with small numbers of people experiencing homelessness still have access to housing resources. CoC-wide projects offer a way to keep all regions invested in the work and in the benefits of CoC planning.
- **Other CoC Initiatives to Benefit Regions:** Some CoCs have built on their partnerships across regions to position themselves to secure other resources, such as multi-region Youth Homeless Demonstration Projects or other federal or state grants. By engaging regions and encouraging their leadership and coordination, CoCs may gain resources and advance new strategies. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can be a valuable partner in reaching across regions to provide resources to support the efforts to end homelessness.

**PLANNING & COORDINATION**

**Coordinated entry** rollout is an opportunity to engage regions in decision-making and local control. With their input, the CoC sets overarching standards, a common assessment tool, and common prioritization. The regions then implement regional access, assessment, by-name list management, selection, and matching.

**III. INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS**

*People with lived experience of homelessness — across regions and from different subpopulations — offer important perspectives in shaping strategic leadership and informing CoC policies and practices.*

While all CoCs have the regulatory requirement to include a person with lived experience (consumer) on its Board, it is a best practice to engage consumers in all levels of system planning and to structure governance so that the involvement of people with lived experience is maximized. CoCs committed to engaging people with lived experience typically create a structured consumer engagement strategy. It may include: how often they will reach out to consumers within each region, who will lead the outreach and engagement, how many reserved seats within planning bodies will be for consumers, how input will be used, and how consumers will be informed of the ways their feedback was incorporated into system

design. CoCs may define overall expectations for regions (e.g., frequency of outreach, plans for incorporating input into local planning), but leave it to the regions to decide on implementation.

### **Invest Resources To Encourage Consumers**

**To Participate:** Promoting consumer engagement takes capacity and resources to ensure the engagement is meaningful for both the consumer and the system's other stakeholders. Below are knowledge and resource considerations when developing a consumer engagement strategy.

- **Biases:** Understanding that professionals (non-consumers) involved in CoC planning may dismiss the opinion and expertise of consumers because they may not be versed in the CoC language or because they do not have degrees in related field of study. CoCs need to identify these attitudes, whether overt or subtle, and work through explicit discussion and facilitation to make the non-consumers aware of these potential biases.
- **Social and Cultural Barriers:** CoCs must recognize that consumers may face key barriers to full participation. Many may not have experience attending meetings, following rules of order, or other things the non-consumers in the group may take for granted. By proactively addressing these challenges the CoC will help to build trust and achieve more meaningful input and participation.
- **Compensation:** Paying consumers for their time to serve on the CoC Board or local planning group, attend committee meetings, or participate in focus groups is essential to recognizing the value of each person's time commitment, and may help with recruitment. In addition to compensation, incentives such as child care or covering transportation costs or providing rides may be critical to fostering consumer engagement.
- **Staff & Mentor Time:** Staff, volunteer or mentor time is necessary to any effort to organize outreach strategies, engage consumers, and encourage their participation. For example, consumers who join planning bodies may be paired with mentors (e.g., staff, other consumers experienced in CoC planning) to provide an orientation to the system so new members may more fully participate in the process.

### **Employ Multiple Engagement Strategies to Promote**

**Robust Consumer Input:** Consumer engagement is an ongoing process. To achieve a higher degree of consumer voice, it is necessary to employ multiple strategies simultaneously so that the CoC is gaining input from a diverse variety of consumers.

- **Board Seats:** Ideally, the CoC Board, a crucial part of the central CoC leadership body, will have multiple consumer seats and may match consumers with mentors (see above). Regions may rotate filling seats for board terms,

providing a range of consumer perspectives by region in the CoC Leadership Body.

- **Consumer Advisory Councils & Committees:** Recruiting consumers for committees, both at the CoC and regional planning group level, can be another way to engage diverse consumer perspectives. Some CoCs design specific consumer-advisory councils that are integrated into the larger CoC governance structure as a way to continually receive and incorporate consumer voice into system design. Promoting consumer voice includes giving those with lived experience of homelessness roles in the planning process as their time allows.
- **Strategies to Gather Feedback:** CoCs may use focus groups and listening sessions within their regions as a way to get feedback. Regions may implement these strategies, for example, onsite at agencies administering housing projects or via existing consumer gatherings such as a youth action board meeting. Using social media to host a consumer page is a way to get consumer input about homeless services and policies and to foster discussion. In sparsely populated regions where gathering people in-person is difficult, using social media and surveys may ensure the voices of consumers are heard and factored into regional planning.

### **PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE**

**Youth Action Boards** may be set up — the CoC recruits youth from the regions to meet in-person or remotely via video, with open membership that may vary from meeting-to-meeting. Youth may serve as regional ambassadors, recruiting more youth from their areas and running listening sessions to gather a broader array of youth input.

## **IV. RESOURCES TO SUPPORT COC REGIONAL PLANNING**

CoCs that span large and diverse geographies incur certain financial costs to successfully administer the CoC's functions including planning, consumer engagement, and monitoring. CoCs can access financial resources to cover these costs through direct funding appeals or through partnerships with funded agencies. CoCs may also leverage existing programs and resources to cover some or all of its costs. Ideally a CoC has a comprehensive picture of the costs of carrying out planning activities so that it can develop a proactive plan to access needed resources.

- **CoC Planning Grants:** CoCs can apply for CoC planning grants through the CoC Program Competition. While HUD cannot guarantee CoC planning grants will be offered each year, it is HUD's intent to continue to fund CoC planning grants at 3 percent of the CoC's Final Pro Rata Need (FPRN). Please look to the annual CoC Program Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) to determine whether your CoC can apply for CoC planning grants and for how much. CoC planning grants can be used for the cost of fulfilling the CoC responsibilities outlined in 24 CFR 578.7, including: pay for staff or

consultants to develop community-wide planning processes; to monitor programs and to evaluate the outcomes of programs; to prepare the CoC application to HUD; and to conduct the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count. CoCs may provide CoC planning funds to support regional planning work that aligns with the CoC's overall efforts in ending homelessness, including providing some of the funds from the CoC planning grant directly to regional members. Others centralize the grant funds to cover the costs of a single organization that serves the entire CoC geography.

- **Other Public Funds:** CoCs have successfully leveraged resources from local government or initiatives funded by other state or federal resources to pay for CoC operations. For example, a local city or county government supports covers the salary or a portion of the salary of one or more employees to work on aspects of CoC planning. This can often provide professional staff who remain with their agency, and thereby the CoC for a number of years, thereby providing stability. CoCs have successfully partnered with other initiatives that share a focus on a subpopulation. For example, partner with the VA Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) providers to assist with planning efforts to serve veterans including management of a by-name list or case conferencing support. In addition to providing housing resources, VA SSVF staff have provided critical landlord engagement opportunities and enhanced CoC street outreach capacity.
- **Private Funds:** CoCs can access private resources made available by philanthropic organizations and/or corporations. For example, United Way may provide funds to provide direct staff support or funds for consumer stipends and travel costs. Corporate partnerships can help a CoC obtain needed technology such as purchasing tablets for mobile outreach teams and field-based case

## CONCLUSION

By giving careful consideration to CoC structure and involvement at three levels—central CoC governance, regional planning, and inclusion of people with lived experience throughout—the CoC will be well positioned to balance its diverse geography. With clear structures that encourage regional input and leadership a CoC can have strong central governance as well as sufficient regional autonomy so that regions are key partners in identifying needs, improving system performance, and carrying out CoC planning to address and end homelessness.

**NEXT STEPS:** For more information, visit these resources:

**HUD Exchange - CoC Program Toolkit:** <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/> - Go to CoC Responsibilities and Duties, and then to CoC Governance and Structure

**CoC Program Interim Rule:** [https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/CoCProgramInterimRule\\_FormattedVersion.pdf](https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/CoCProgramInterimRule_FormattedVersion.pdf)

**Learn from other CoCs:** Do Internet research of CoC websites for access to quality governance charter templates and ideas for structuring regional involvement.

**Balance of State Toolkit:** <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Balance-of-State-Continuum-of-Care-Toolkit.pdf>

managers or discounted private internet connections (i.e., VPN) to allow file sharing across geography for routine monitoring. Additional partnerships with large cell phone providers can allow for discounted WIFI and rural access for providers in the field (PIT counts, outreach, etc.).

- **Hospitals and health care systems:** Health care providers, especially hospitals, may contribute to planning efforts and data analysis that seeks to identify the prevalence of high utilizers of emergency services as an effort to reduce these costs.
- **In Kind Staff:** CoCs have also met the staffing and planning costs by leveraging in-kind staff resources. For example, a local city or county may dedicate a portion of an employee's time to assist with CoC planning activities. Community Action Agencies and Public Housing Agencies may also make staff available to support planning efforts by coordinating distribution of agendas, and hosting in-person and virtual meetings.
- **Volunteers:** Vista or other trained volunteers including interns from local colleges and universities can help with planning activities, including organizing and staffing CoC meetings and helping to conduct the PIT count. While these volunteers provide important skills and person-power, a CoC must work to put in place a system to train new volunteers and interns once these have left their assignments.

There are other sources of volunteers as well. For example, retirees can be recruited to help support the PIT count and provide transportation to CoC meetings. Faith-based organizations can host meetings, ensure widespread distribution of meeting notices, and solicit needed feedback.