

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 10, 2019



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Yakima Valley Conference of Governments: HOMELESS PROGRAM RETURNS TO YAKIMA COUNTY

Effective July 1st, the Yakima Valley Conference of Governments (YVCOG) will be returning the Homeless Housing and Assistance Program to Yakima County as a compliant and thriving program! YVCOG managed the Homeless Program for our valley since July 1, 2015.

The Yakima Valley Conference of Governments was created by the valley's 14 cities and Yakima County in 1966 to address "matters of mutual concern." We are governed by a seven-member executive committee, who is in turn accountable to the roughly 100 elected officials from the municipalities in the Yakima Valley.

Yakima County Commissioners approached YVCOG in October of 2014 asking them to take the Homeless Program. The commissioners were eliminating the county's Human Services Department and 'finding homes' for these types of programs. Management of the homeless program was offered to the YVCOG membership under the rationale that homelessness was more of a city issue than a county issue. At that time, the Commissioners stated that the County was not in the human services business and believed these social programs would best be served in other agencies.

The county commissioners' concerns fell under three broad categories in 2014-15. Those concerns, and YVCOG's solutions to those concerns, are described below.

Yakima County commissioners were concerned about the ‘black hole’ of homeless funding, as they called it. Millions of dollars were spent every year with few permanent solutions being developed.

- YVCOG required a procurement process and awarded public funds based on the 5-year Plan to make homelessness in Yakima County ‘Brief & Rare’
- YVCOG awarded funds to pilot projects to find permanent solutions assisting individuals entering homelessness or those labeled as chronically homeless
- YVCOG developed relationships with other service providers in the community to bring them to the table to discuss challenges and best practices
- YVCOG tracked and audited service providers for the services they requested reimbursement for
- YVCOG performed on-site inspections, both announced and unannounced, to ensure providers were performing the duties required of them
- YVCOG awarded funding for permanent facilities at the Yakima Neighborhood Health’s Rhonda Hauff Resource Center, Yakima’s first Tiny Homes, infrastructure at Camp Hope in the City of Yakima, and a Youth shelter and Housing for Rod’s House.

Prior to YVCOG’s acceptance of the program in 2015, commissioners did not believe they were being informed accurately regarding the program.

- YVCOG Staff reported to the Governing Board of YVCOG during monthly meetings as to the performance of service providers
- YVCOG Staff reported to the Department of Commerce as to the performance of service providers
- YVCOG Staff reported to the Homeless Housing Policy Board funding and service needs
- YVCOG Staff held all meetings in an open public meeting forum and listened to community members who had concerns regarding homelessness and the impacts on our community

Prior to YVCOG’s acceptance of the program, commissioners stated the program was being run by the service providers, which too closely resembled the fox guarding the henhouse.

- YVCOG separated relations with the Homeless Network and created a new community group which included representatives from businesses, rental housing, law enforcement, service agencies, government, a homeless/previously homeless person, the faith community, and community members to review and recommend program direction
- YVCOG disallowed any service provider from serving on the scoring committee to award funding. Projects were evaluated, scored, and ranked by a ‘jury’ of concerned Yakima Valley residents.

- YVCOG required that all available funds go through a competitive bidding process to be awarded by agencies to ensure there was no conflict of interest.

Also in 2015, county commissioners asked for COG's help to clean up the program to make it compliant with Department of Commerce rules.

- YVCOG responded to Department of Commerce regarding the program not complying when it was being managed at Yakima County. YVCOG came up with a corrective action plan which was accepted by Commerce and now the program is compliant and able to continue to receive funding.
- YVCOG created a committee to implement, streamline and prioritize homeless individuals with available funding for services.
- YVCOG required and monitored service providers to clean up their recordkeeping and make accurate entries into the state online system
- YVCOG contracted with an outside agency to perform the annual Point in Time homeless count in January
- YVCOG eliminated the Project Homeless Connect during the January count, allowing an additional \$40,000 or more to go to service providers to address the immediate needs of homeless
- YVCOG awarded a low-barrier emergency shelter allowing over 100 individuals and families to live in a shelter with food, water and heat
- YVCOG eliminated the annual panic to secure emergency shelters in local churches each winter

YVCOG quickly understood the Commissioners concerns. YVCOG is proud of the hard work put into the homeless housing and assistance program by its staff, member cities, service providers, business partners, the faith community, law enforcement, landlords, and community members. We know, under the direction of YVCOG Executive Committee, that we are giving back to the county a thriving program where cities are engaged and service providers are held accountable.

YVCOG - Convener, Catalyst and Resource.

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