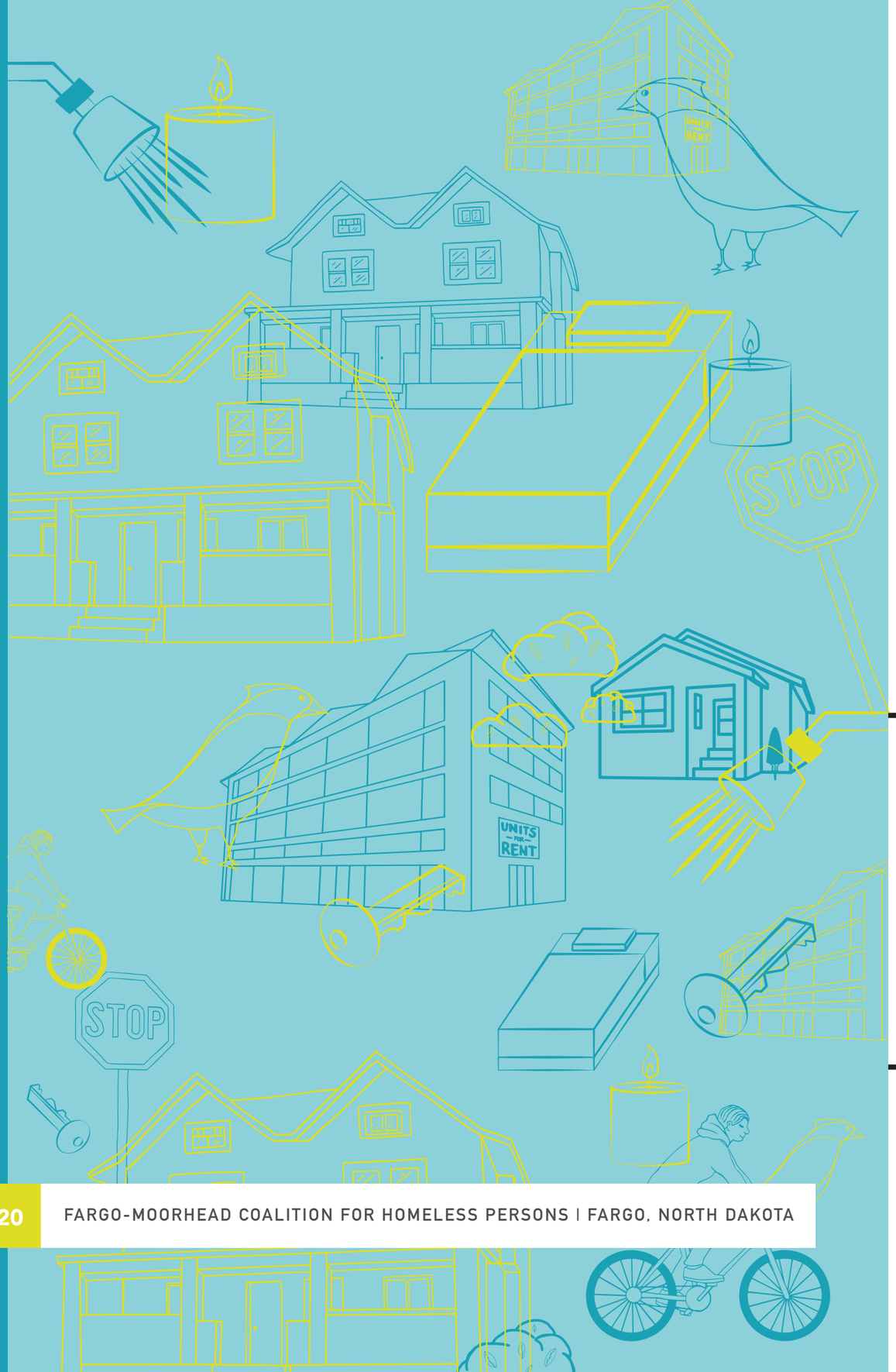
YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 1989

GEOGRAPHY
North Dakota | Minnesota
Native nations

BUDGET
$1M — $4,999,999

LEADER
Cody Schuler



FM COALITION FOR HOMELESS PERSONS

Help Beyond Borders

Fargo-Moorhead Coalition for Homeless Persons (FM Coalition) bridges geopolitical borders to find permanent solutions to homelessness. By bringing together stakeholders from multiple sectors and across city, county and state lines, FM Coalition helps all of its partners better address the many issues that contribute to homelessness in the region.

"Having a home is a human right, because it's central to being human."

Cody Schuler
FM Coalition

Story by Morgan Mercer

INNOVATION STORY Nº 2

INNOVATION

FARGO-MOORHEAD COALITION FOR HOMELESS PERSONS

With relentless collaboration, and by continuously identifying areas of need, FM Coalition advances collaborative solutions and improvements that address many causes of homelessness.

BREAKTHROUGH

Using its collaborative approach, FM Coalition developed a multistate model to fix the fragmented services that present barriers for people experiencing homelessness. The success of this model and the improvements it enabled were made possible by the Coalition's ability to overcome the challenging jurisdictional context in the region.

THE TEAM APPROACH

FM Coalition always opts for cooperation over competition. When the United Way offered $600,000 for a case management system overhaul, the group worked with its members to create a collaborative design process that could engage the entire community.

MOVING PAST MISTAKES

When a data consolidation project stalled after three years of effort, FM Coalition channeled the setback into a fresh start. The Coalition led a team effort to take stock of what went wrong so that past mistakes wouldn't be repeated in the future.

About once a month, a man stopped by the shelter in Fargo where Beth Olsen worked. He was in his 30s and had been homeless nearly half his life.

He slept outside, and when Beth saw him, she often noticed scrapes and bruises on his skin. Whenever he visited, Beth asked him the same question: "Do you want to fill out any housing applications yet?" She'd plop a huge stack of papers — nearly three inches thick — on the desk between the two of them. His answer was always the same: "No." He just wanted to get a cup of coffee, take a shower and plot out a safe place to sleep for the night where he wouldn't get attacked.

"He was having a really rough time," Beth says. "It's hard to focus on paperwork, which includes a lot of personal and invasive questions, when you're worried about those other pieces." For nearly four years, this was how the scene played out. At that time, each housing provider in Fargo-Moorhead had its own housing application, and there were at least seven different forms shelters asked clients to fill out if they wanted to find somewhere to stay. Oftentimes, people who were homeless had to wait two or three years to get an apartment through one of the programs.

"At every level of the work we do, that border is a wall we have to figure out how to cross."

Cody Schuler
Fargo-Moorhead Coalition for Homeless Persons

Two years before coordinated entry became a funding mandate, the federal government required of shelters, members of the FM Coalition started discussing what it would take to build a joint system across the river.

Across the river — which means working across two cities and two states, clearing all the hurdles that would entail.

In a place where geopolitical barriers made working alongside partners the exception rather than the norm, the FM Coalition became the platform where people came together. Together, Coalition members came up with the Coordinated Assessment Referral and Evaluation System (CARES), which pared down the numerous housing applications into a simple digital assessment. With an easier application, the FM Coalition hoped to cut down on the number of hoops people had to jump through to qualify for housing and encourage a shift in thinking throughout the industry and the wider community — toward the idea that housing isn't a privilege for those who can prove they deserve it but a right everyone deserves.

"When you think about what it means to not have an address, you all of a sudden don't necessarily have an identity in society if you don't have a place to call your own," says Cody. "Having a home is a human right, because it's central to being human."

The next time the man visited Beth's shelter, he was in the worst shape she had ever seen him. He was bruised, shaking and bleeding from the head. The shelter called an ambulance and took him to the emergency room. After recovering over the weekend, he returned to the shelter on Monday. He told Beth he was sick of living outside and getting beat up. Beth brought up the same question she had for years: "Are you ready to fill out some housing applications?" But instead of following it up with a daunting stack of papers, she opened a survey on her computer. It would only take 15 minutes to fill out, she said. He agreed. Three weeks later, the man moved into his first apartment in 14 years.

For once, he didn't have to worry about getting stabbed in his sleep or wonder where he would get his next meal.

INNOVATION STORY NO. 2 | FARGO-MOORHEAD COALITION FOR HOMELESS PERSONS

CHARACTERISTIC Nº 1

The FM Coalition team doesn't just analyze programs when they fail but builds in regular reviews throughout the year to assess programs even when they seem to be on the right track. To establish CARES, the FM Coalition had to tear down outdated systems that were long past their prime. When CARES launched, the Coalition wanted to ensure that the new system didn't become obsolete like the previous one had. To avoid that, it created a data and evaluation committee. "We're taking every piece of the system apart and putting it back together at least on an annual basis," says Cody. Every year the group reviews and reads policies, procedures and partnership agreements from cover to cover. With data the FM Coalition tracks for HUD, the team reviews what's working, what isn't and what could be improved.

For once, he didn't have to worry about getting stabbed in his sleep or wonder where he would get his next meal. Instead, he got to visit the doctor's office for the first time since he was 17 years old. He even had time to think about picking up a long-forgotten hobby, says Beth — painting. "He got to be a human."

DOWNTOWN FARGO, ND

THE TEAM APPROACH

In 2015, United Way of Cass-Clay put out a call for proposals: $600,000 over three years for any provider of homelessness services that could implement a better case management system.

It was a mad dash for funding. Several organizations from the FM Coalition's membership applied, including the Coalition itself. However, the Coalition proposed a unique approach: Rather than a single provider developing a new case management system, it suggested a collaborative design process in which the entire community could feel ownership.

"There is often ongoing tension between partners, and even the Coalition at times, because of overlapping missions," says Cody. "Whenever challenges arise, we try to make partners aware of places where we should be working together rather than competing."

United Way agreed. It put off awarding the grant and asked the FM Coalition to co-design a new case management program alongside the community. Once the program was drawn up, United Way would put out a new call for proposals and award the $600,000 to an agency that wanted to implement the newly designed system.

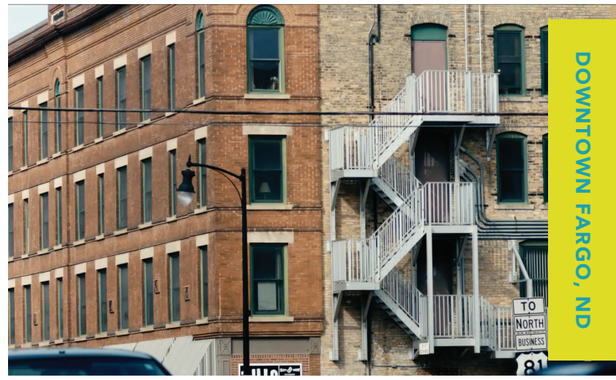
The Coalition kicked off the process by hosting an open public forum. More than 60 people showed up to learn more about the process and volunteer for the design team. From there, Coalition staff narrowed the group to a team of 25 people and a note taker, who took detailed records of the meetings and displayed them on a large TV in the room to make sure the organization had accurately captured the thoughts and feelings of the group.

Whenever someone made a proposal, Cody referred to the notes on screen and asked group members how they felt. "We all had to agree upon everything that came out of that room at least on some level," says Cody.

CHARACTERISTIC Nº 2

Before coordinated entry, housing applications included a list of requirements people had to meet before qualifying for housing, such as getting a job or showing they were making progress toward their sobriety. People experiencing homelessness were often stuck demonstrating to providers that they were motivated, respectful and hardworking — in other words, deserving of housing. Not only were those qualities subjective, but the method pitted service providers against one another. Instead of focusing on ending homelessness, it was easy for staff from different agencies to get wrapped up in judging which clients other providers decided to help house or not. Creating one simple, shared assessment through coordinated entry ended that. The simplified application developed a shared language among providers thanks to a rating system focused on acuity, or how likely someone was to die on the street. "I remember at our first training when we heard those words, an entire room of 250 people went still," says Beth. "At the end of the day, we all approach housing differently, but there isn't one provider that wants anyone to die on the street. The shared language unified our values and gave us a common goal to work on together." Rather than accepting or rejecting people for housing based on a laundry list of requirements, the new assessment gave providers a single way to determine which individuals were most at risk and bump them to the top of housing lists, regardless of other factors.

FM COALITION TEAM



DOWNTOWN FARGO, ND

“We try not to have meetings that don’t have a purpose.”

Cody Schuler
Fargo-Moorhead Coalition for Homeless Persons

The team never voted on a decision but took temperature checks throughout meetings. Thumbs-up meant full support. A thumb to the side meant a team member had reservations about an idea but wasn’t willing to prevent the team from moving forward. A thumbs-down from a participant meant Cody paused the group until it could come to a resolution, even if that meant tabling the discussion of an idea and returning to it at a later time.

At the end of each meeting, Cody sent out a survey to the wider community with an in-depth account of the minutes and what the group discussed. Community members could choose to give anonymous feedback on the design team’s progress by sharing comments, rating decisions or posing questions to the group. At the start of every meeting, the design team reviewed this feedback first.

“It was massively helpful because you get so focused on your objectives and the population you serve,” says Beth, who was a member of a design team. In her work at the Dorothy Day House in Fargo, she spent time with individuals who were often the hardest to house. “We all have our compartments that we’re good at, but then we would get feedback from other agencies or community members who asked, ‘What are you going to do about the refugees?’ It was like, ‘Whoa, I never thought of them.’”

Because of the competition surrounding United Way’s initial call for proposals, the FM Coalition knew it had to find a way to loop the community into the decisions the design team made to ensure widespread support. For the Coalition, the survey provided a solution for keeping the size of the design team manageable while remaining open to ideas from those who weren’t at the table.

“We knew you couldn’t design this with a room full of 70 people, yet we wanted as much transparency as possible. Any number of bad results could have come from the process had we hidden underground and emerged in the daylight with a product,” says Cody. “Sometimes the way we make the biggest social impact isn’t by being the most efficient. Sometimes we have to talk about people’s feelings longer and get everyone on board so we can move forward.”

MOVING PAST MISTAKES

To end homelessness in the Fargo-Moorhead community, shelters on both sides of the river had to work together.

However, data from Cass and Clay counties lived in two separate federally mandated databases. Each county collected data differently, and providers couldn’t merge the two lists together. Without shared numbers, providers of homelessness services couldn’t see which shelters had open beds or which clients most needed a place to sleep each night. To fix that, the FM Coalition hired a company to build a data bridge between the two systems — but after months of planning, the company backed out. The Coalition found itself back at square one.

“There’s not a lot of room to cry in your beer,” says Cody, especially in a field where your work could mean the difference between someone sleeping in a bed or outside on a cold night. “When something goes wrong, we don’t linger long on the mistake. We jump almost immediately to what’s next. The mistakes are the only way you learn.”

The next day, Cody began searching for a workaround. Even if the Coalition couldn’t build a data bridge between the two systems, he knew there had to be an alternative solution that would lead to the same outcome: shared data that would help service providers work better. In the three years since the project took its first tumble, the Coalition bounced back and has cycled through several iterations of solutions.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CLIENT CENTRIC SERVICES

“There’s creative energy in that conflict. Sometimes we come up with better ideas because we have to compromise.”

Cody Schuler
Fargo-Moorhead Coalition for Homeless Persons

“I like to think of conflict as an opportunity for transformation rather than a roadblock,” says Cody. “There’s creative energy in that conflict. Sometimes we come up with better ideas because we have to compromise.”

So what does it take to channel a setback into a fresh start? First, the Coalition gives members time to reflect on what happened as a group. “We take a whiteboard and start doing an autopsy of what went wrong and what happened,” says Cody. Keeping track of each roadblock helped Coalition members, and new staff who joined the work midprocess, remember where the organization had been and what it had tried. Recalling past mistakes helped prevent the group from repeating the same errors as it moved forward.

However, taking time during a meeting to dissect the failures of a project can quickly turn into an opportunity to complain. To stay productive, the Coalition anchors group reflections — especially those after a setback — in a new goal. “You can have the same meeting over and over again and never do anything,” says Cody. “We try not to have meetings that don’t have a purpose.” Setting a new goal reminds members of their shared mission and gives them a common point to rally around. Rather than focusing on what went wrong, the group reframes setbacks as an opportunity to learn what to try next. Like a guiding star, the Coalition repeatedly acts as a directional point that reorients partners back to the true focus of their work: finding housing for those who have none.

CHARACTERISTIC №3

When United Way first called for proposals, competition was fierce among providers. Everyone wanted more money, and trading that opportunity in favor of collaborative design wasn’t initially a popular alternative. “When you build your own empire, you get more funding,” says Cody. “People could have seen this collaborative approach as a slap in the face to what they could have done on their own. To do this, we had to make sure this felt like it was owned by everyone.” That thinking drove the design process throughout: from the choice to kick off planning with a large group meeting where everyone could share their voice to the surveys that kept the wider community involved in decisions made behind closed doors.

CODY SCHULER

DOWNTOWN FARGO, ND

FM COALITION OFFICE

MOORHEAD WATER TOWER

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

FM COALITION MEETING