



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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Milwaukee Health Care Stakeholders Investing in Housing Supports

Report examines efforts to help patients find housing, highlights steps needed for expansion

Milwaukee County's private-sector health care stakeholders increasingly are investing in strategies to help find and stabilize housing for the individuals they serve, and early assessments suggest these efforts are making a positive difference, according to a new report coauthored by the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

These nascent efforts – while promising – could be better informed by enhanced data collection going forward, the report finds. Meanwhile, barriers to further progress remain in the form of the county's larger challenges related to quality affordable housing and emergency shelter capacity for people experiencing or at risk of imminent homelessness.

This report was authored jointly by the Forum and IMPACT Planning and Evaluation. It assesses the state of housing and health care in the county by analyzing an initiative created by [Milwaukee Health Care Partnership](#) (MHCP) members called "[Housing is Health](#)," as well as the broader landscape of health care-sponsored housing support initiatives for Milwaukee County residents. It also offers a brief scan of how health care stakeholders are investing in housing supports in other communities.

MHCP was created in 2007 to coordinate and expand the efforts of health systems, federally qualified health centers, and local and state governments to improve health outcomes for low-income and underserved populations. In 2019, MHCP piloted Housing is Health (HIH) and has expanded it since. The program works with hospitals and primary care providers throughout Milwaukee County to identify individuals who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness when they enter health care settings, and connect them through a shared process with supports to achieve housing stability.

Program has grown rapidly

When a person who is homeless or shows housing vulnerability enters a participating HIH hospital inpatient facility, emergency room, or safety net clinic, they are screened to determine their basic housing needs. If appropriate, a referral is made to a process that provides additional assessment, then connects them to needed interventions and supports.

Since its inception in 2019, HIH has grown in partnership with various health care providers. These include Ascension Wisconsin, Aurora Health Care, Froedtert ThedaCare Health Inc., the Children's Wisconsin Midtown Clinic, the five federally qualified health centers located in Milwaukee County, and the largest free clinic serving the uninsured, Bread of Healing Clinic.

After fewer than 100 referrals were made in 2019, the program grew to nearly 300 referrals in both 2020 and 2021, then up to 653 in 2022. Of these, 142 clients (slightly more than one-fifth) received initial permanent housing placement as a result of their participation in HIH in 2022.

Other local efforts

Several health insurers and specialty providers in Milwaukee County similarly are investing in housing supports for their patients and members. Both HIH and these efforts by other health care entities are widely praised by staff directly involved with patient care and with housing navigation, referral, and placement services, the report finds. Core elements of these efforts include systematic screening and assessment; knowledgeable and well-connected housing navigators; flexible financial supports for housing needs; and collaborative communication and partnerships.

The report also finds that greater coordination and collaboration among these entities in areas such as data collection and sharing and standardization of practices may be beneficial in improving and expanding housing services. In addition, the report concludes that “gaps in the county’s larger affordable housing and homelessness prevention landscape hamper the initiative’s potential.”

“The success of existing health care-related housing initiatives is significantly limited by the broader housing challenges facing the Milwaukee community,” the report found. “In particular, (interviewees) cited a lack of both immediate shelter beds and quality permanent housing to serve individuals with complex conditions and histories.”

A national scan

Our research also included a broad national scan to identify examples from other metro areas where health care entities are providing housing supports to their patients. Some attempt not only to help individuals better navigate their housing systems similar to efforts in Milwaukee County, but also try to influence the systems directly, including with “bricks and mortar” investments in new housing.

Examples of the latter can be found in Denver and Atlanta, where initiatives are underway to directly build housing that can serve patients. Private health care stakeholders in other cities are also investing directly in supportive housing services and in medical respite housing for recovering patients who no longer require hospitalization but are not yet ready to move into permanent housing.

Overall, we found many examples of health care organizations reaching a similar conclusion as here in Milwaukee: that investing in housing supports for patients with significant housing challenges has potential to produce better patient outcomes. In some communities, however, these organizations are investing more heavily in broader affordable housing and homelessness prevention efforts.

The report concludes that expansion to other vulnerable populations could be a next step, and data and communications gaps should be addressed. It also suggests that health care stakeholders consider playing a bigger role in working with other community leaders to pursue system-level solutions that will address a lack of both immediate shelter beds and quality affordable permanent housing for those at risk of homelessness.

“Taking the next steps with some level of collaboration could leverage best practices, reduce costs, ensure that investments in expanded and new initiatives occur strategically and effectively, and achieve the ultimate goal of creating a healthier community,” the report concludes.

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