



## Homelessness in Calhoun County Decreased by 14% over 6 Years

In this piece, we explore how Systems Thinking can bring communities together by creating a shared understanding of a problem and lead to important insights that have both immediate and long-term impacts.

### Homelessness Coalition Utilizes Systems Thinking Resources for Major Results

The Greater Battle Creek Homeless Coalition, of Calhoun County, Mich., observed a growing population of homeless individuals in 2006. This population growth occurred despite a wide-range of community groups working to provide services, shelters, and other comprehensive resources.

The Greater Battle Creek Homeless Coalition, in collaboration with Systems Thinking professionals David Peter Stroh and Michael Goodman, focused resources and energy on the creation of a ten-year plan to reduce homelessness in Calhoun County with help from a grant from the Kellogg Foundation.

*"The tools are a great way to have a different kind of conversation without a lot of blaming and finger pointing."*

*- Michael Goodman*

In 2012, six years into their ten-year plan, Calhoun County had measured a significant decrease in homelessness, with 14% fewer people living on the streets, despite the 2008 economic collapse and a 34% increase in unemployment in the county.

### Systems Thinking Model Validates External Research

Systems Thinking veterans David Peter Stroh and Michael Goodman were brought on board to work with the steering committee to analyze and create a plan using Systems Thinking tools. Through participating in community discussions, Stroh and Goodman learned about the Calhoun County Shelter system and other services that provided for homeless individuals to better understand the situation. From these conversations, Goodman and Stroh created stock and flow diagrams and causal loops that confirmed the advantages of a Housing First model where a priority is placed on providing permanent housing for homeless individuals.

As David Peter Stroh noted, "Once [homeless individuals] have a roof over their head, the other

symptoms are easier to treat. Many things open up as possibilities when you have an address, an identity. The side effects of being homeless are huge.”

Through their stock and flow diagram of the problem, Stroh and Goodman identified four stages of homelessness and the relationships between these stages. As shown in the diagram below, the stock of people in temporary housing has two outflows—people moving into permanent housing and people moving back to the streets. As a result of this insight, the steering committee worked to understand the outflow of people moving from temporary housing back onto the street, and what could be done to prevent it.

### Positive Conversation Facilitated by Value-Free Systems Tools

Stroh and Goodman communicated their findings and observations in further meetings with the Battle Creek Homelessness Coalition, community members, homeless individuals, service providers, funders, and local politicians.

With meeting attendees from various backgrounds, the Systems Thinking tools provided a way to

examine the factors surrounding a problem without adding negativity or antagonism to the conversation. In contrast, the diagrams and language Goodman and Stroh used helped the group to recognize the problem they were facing in the model and conduct powerful conversations around it.

***In Stroh’s words, “The big insight was that the shelter systems had been considered to be the solution, when in fact it became part of the problem when thinking about how to eliminate homelessness.”***

### Old Solutions Now Identified as Problems

From their Systems Thinking analysis, Stroh and Goodman also identified that temporary housing and the shelter system in Calhoun County were contributing to continued homelessness.

While shelters served as an effective short-term solution, they often perpetuated homelessness by acting as a band-aid and temporary solution. A system where this happens—a solution becomes

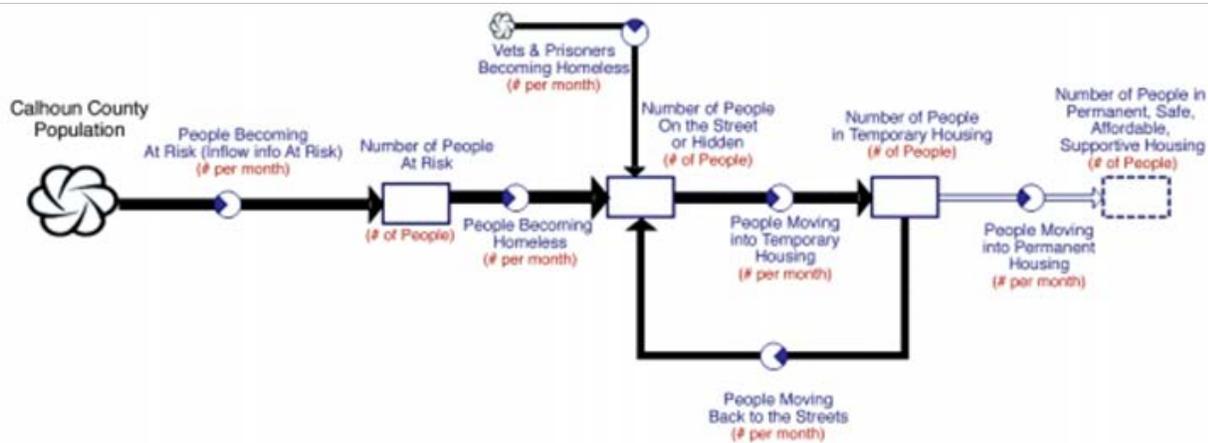


Figure 1. The four stages of homelessness that Goodman and Stroh identified are: People becoming at risk of losing their homes; people losing their homes and having to live on the street; people finding temporary shelter off the street; people moving from temporary shelter back into permanent housing. As demonstrated by this stock and flow diagram, the relationship between these stages is not just linear — there are also people moving from temporary housing back onto the street.





## Funding Changes Made Due to Clarity Provided by Systems Tools

While Goodman and Stroh identified the factors at work in the homeless situation and the elements that needed to change— actually affecting change depends significantly on resources and community engagement. As Jennifer Bentley, the former president of the Greater Battle Creek Homeless Coalition noted, “It is hard in a community to say we want to take money from you and give it to someone else—there wasn’t a single funding entity, so there were some uncomfortable conversations.”

But these difficult conversations lead to action. In one meeting with stakeholders, the Systems Thinking tools were so effective for facilitating communication that funders shifted their priorities and their funding immediately to Housing First models that focused on moving people into housing rather than shelters or other services.

*Thanks to David Peter Stroh, Michael Goodman, and Jennifer Bentley for sharing their study with us and taking the time to speak with us.*

## Wider Impact of Systems Thinking

This thorough Systems Thinking analysis, combined with the positive community contributions, has had a positive effect on ending homelessness in Calhoun County—over the last six years there has been a 14% decrease in the homeless population, despite a 34% increase in unemployment. Examining all of the factors and identifying, among other elements, the “Fixes that Fail,” allowed the plan to have a resonant impact.

Systems Thinking made a significant contribution to moving this plan forward and Jennifer Bentley agrees that Systems Thinking has the capacity for a wider impact: “All kinds of social issues are caused by systems — this type of thinking could be applied to and have an impact in several fields.” Exploring these enduring challenges and finding leverage with systemic solutions is an important and exciting prospect for communities around the world.

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## Sources

1. Stroh, David Peter and Michael Goodman. “A Systemic Approach to Ending Homelessness.” *Applied Systems Thinking Journal Topical Issues, Article 4, 2007.* [http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com/supporting\\_documents/TopicalHomelessness.pdf](http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com/supporting_documents/TopicalHomelessness.pdf)

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