

## **Project Narrative/Statement of Need**

Union Mission of Latrobe, Inc. is committed to addressing the multifaceted needs of the homeless population in Westmoreland County through an extensive array of services designed to foster stability and self-sufficiency. The 2023 Gaps Analysis for the Western PA Continuum of Care (CoC) underscores the critical demand for these services, revealing that Westmoreland County had 451 households accessing Coordinated Entry—the highest in the region. In contrast, Lawrence County had 357 households, and Washington County had 313 households. Despite the high demand, Westmoreland County is underserved, having only 190 beds dedicated to homeless services compared to Lawrence's 260 beds and Washington's 306 beds. This discrepancy highlights a significant service gap that Union Mission aims to bridge through its comprehensive programming and robust support systems.

The homeless population in Westmoreland County is diverse and complex, comprising 75% white, 17% black, 4% multi-racial, 2% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 1% identifying as other ethnicities. Additionally, 80% of the households served are without children, indicating a substantial need for services tailored to single adults and adult-only households. Tailored interventions for these groups are crucial, as they face unique challenges in accessing and maintaining stable housing including co-morbid health conditions, co-occurring substance use and behavioral health conditions.

While the 2023 Point-in-Time (PIT) count data for Westmoreland County reflects a low number of unsheltered homeless individuals, with fewer than three individuals counted, this figure does not accurately represent the true extent of unsheltered homelessness in the county. Westmoreland County's large geographic area and rural landscape pose considerable challenges in reaching and accurately counting the unsheltered homeless population, particularly during the cold winter months when the PIT count is conducted. In an effort to acquire more accurate data, the county is in the early stages of building a street outreach presence through the Westmoreland County Housing Advisory Board (WestCoHAB), with Union Mission's active involvement. We are also endorsing and supporting the Department of Human Services' (DHS) effort to foster real-time data sharing across the human services system. These efforts are critical for improving our ability to identify and count the unsheltered population more accurately, thereby providing a clearer picture of the need.

The economic landscape of Westmoreland County helps to further underline the challenges faced by our homeless population. The county's unemployment rate stands at 3.10%, slightly lower than the state average of 3.4% and the national average of 4%. The poverty rate in Westmoreland County is also 9.7%, compared to 11.8% statewide and 11.5% nationally. These figures highlight that Westmoreland County residents are also experiencing similar economic vulnerabilities that many people are facing state and nationwide, economic factors that contribute to the risk of becoming homeless. Financial instability experienced by a significant portion of the homeless population underscores the need for comprehensive services that address both immediate housing crises and longer-term stability. The economic vulnerabilities contribute to a cycle of instability,

where even minor financial setbacks can lead to homelessness due to the lack of a safety net.

The 2023 Gaps Analysis data demonstrates significant deficiencies in both direct housing assistance and supportive service infrastructure, making it more difficult for individuals and families to access permanent housing. Traditional case management services, such as behavioral health, substance use treatment, and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) services, as well as other cross-system partner services like Child and Youth Services (CYS) and parole/probation, often operate differently from housing and homeless case management. The intensity of services required, the navigation of more complex needs, and the demand for specialized, dedicated, and trained staff to manage these complexities necessitate a robust and well-coordinated system of care. The lack of adequate case management services tailored specifically for the homeless population further exacerbates these challenges, highlighting the urgent need for dedicated resources and specialized support. For instance, the lack of accessible behavioral health services means that individuals with mental health issues often do not receive the support they need, exacerbating their housing instability.

Union Mission has been proactive in responding to these needs, serving over 2,000 households in 2022 and 2023 through a variety of programs, including traditional housing and homeless intervention services, as well as Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) funds. On average, Union Mission assists 500-750 households annually, excluding ERAP, through prevention, diversion, rapid exit, financial assistance, rapid rehousing, permanent housing, shared housing, emergency shelter, and other support services. The proposed project will focus on strengthening key areas and providing critical resource navigation and support to ensure clients receive comprehensive, holistic assistance.

Union Mission's alignment with the Western PA CoC's strategic plan, written standards, and system performance measures is integral to our approach. The CoC's vision of ensuring that everyone has a safe and sustainable place to call home aligns perfectly with our goals of making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. By focusing on critical components that assist individuals and families in preventing homelessness, navigating out of homelessness quickly, and providing ongoing support to maintain housing stability, our programs directly contribute to achieving these objectives. Union Mission adheres to and follows all CoC Written Standards, and our policies and procedures have been reviewed to ensure alignment. Our work supports the CoC's system performance measures, including preventing first-time homelessness, connecting households to mainstream benefits, increasing income, reducing recidivism, and reducing the length of time individuals and families experience homelessness.

To address these gaps and meet the CoC's goals, Union Mission proposes to enhance its existing services through the addition of mobile resource specialists, housing navigation, case management, and financial assistance services. These enhancements are recognized nationally as best practice in service provision to those experiencing

homelessness. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) encourages communities to integrate outreach seamlessly into Coordinated Entry (CE) and facilitating swift housing referrals. A pivotal focus for effective outreach ensures that efforts are inherently housing-focused, while addressing the immediate needs of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. will enable us to provide more targeted and intensive support to those in need, ensuring that individuals and families can access the resources they need to achieve and maintain permanent housing stability. This innovative approach will not only address immediate housing crises but also support long-term stability by connecting participants with mainstream resources and providing ongoing case management and support.

Union Mission's comprehensive approach is designed to meet the diverse and complex needs of the homeless population in Westmoreland County. Our extensive network of partnerships with other human service organizations, grassroots groups, faith communities, and public spaces ensures that we can effectively connect individuals and families with the resources they need. Through our involvement in the Westmoreland County Housing Advisory Board (WestCoHAB) and our role as the Coordinated Entry Lead Agency, we are able to provide a coordinated and integrated response to homelessness. This collaborative approach is essential for addressing the systemic issues that contribute to homelessness and ensuring that individuals and families receive the comprehensive support they need to achieve stability and self-sufficiency. The impact of securing funding for these initiatives cannot be overstated. With the additional resources, Union Mission will be able to expand its reach, enhance its service delivery, and provide more comprehensive support to those in need. By addressing the identified gaps in our homeless response system, we will be able to make a significant impact on the lives of individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Westmoreland County. Our proposed activities align with the CoC's vision and goals, ensuring that our efforts contribute to the broader objective of making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.

In conclusion, the need for expanded and enhanced services in Westmoreland County is evident from the significant gaps identified in the homeless response system, the unique challenges posed by the county's geography and rural landscape, and the economic vulnerabilities faced by many residents. Union Mission's comprehensive and integrated approach, leveraging both internal resources and external partnerships, is designed to address these needs effectively. By securing the necessary funding, we will be able to strengthen our programs, expand our reach, and provide the critical support needed to help individuals and families achieve permanent housing stability and self-sufficiency. Our proposed project is not only aligned with the CoC's strategic plan but also reflects our commitment to making a meaningful impact in the lives of those we serve.