“Homelessness is a very real situation in Moab, even though we don’t always see it,” said Liz Donkersloot.

She’s the housing resource coordinator for the Moab Valley Multicultural Center, one of several social service providers that are part of the Grand County Local Homelessness Council, a group that shares information on issues of housing security and homelessness and how to address them. Along with the multicultural center, members include the Seekhaven Family Crisis and Resource Center, Four Corners Behavioral Health, Moab Solutions, and Moab Regional Hospital.

“These agencies work daily with families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness,” said Donkersloot. A member of the Grand County Commission serves as the chair; recently, Mary McGann passed the position to Commissioner Trisha Hedin.

The group has begun developing a new approach to information sharing, called Coordinated Entry, following federal recommendations.

“We’ve kind of taken our own spin on it in Grand County,” said Donkersloot of the Coordinated Entry approach. “There’s a lot of systems in place at state and federal levels that are really set up for cities and larger towns. Being a smaller rural area, those systems don’t really work for us.”
While various organizations offer resources for people experiencing homelessness, Grand County lacks services like an emergency shelter, temporary housing, or a warming or cooling center for extreme weather days.

The Coordinated Entry approach is a way for organizations to prioritize help for the most vulnerable community members with the most severe needs. It also allows service and aid organizations to share information to identify gaps in service or quickly refer clients to the most appropriate agency or resource. The process, promoted by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, allows service agencies to share information about client cases with each other, while still keeping that information confidential within the coordinating group.

While Moab Regional Hospital can’t participate because of patient confidentiality regulations, the other agencies that make up the Local Homelessness Council have joined the Coordinated Entry group, along with the Department of Workforce Services.

Adapting to the shared information system won’t be difficult in Grand County, says Donkersloot.

“In Moab, our organizations are already so tightly intertwined that we have these conversations in real time,” she said, noting that in more populated areas, such systems can help organizations find the best resources for clients faster.

To begin working within the coordinated entry system, the Local Homelessness Council is focusing on improving data collection.

Each month, participating agencies can give a snapshot of their work, including statistics like how many clients they served, how many were experiencing homelessness, how many were at risk of homelessness, how many were experiencing domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, or how many had felony records. Adjacent data like mental health or felony records are important because they can affect clients’ ability to access and remain in housing.

For example, many housing subsidy programs bar individuals with felony records.

“It’s such a barrier for housing in our community,” said Donkersloot. “A lot of people with these histories—it happened a long time ago, they’ve changed, they’re trying to move on with their lives and there’s no place for these people to live.”
With more comprehensive data, the group will be able to identify the community’s most pressing needs and use the data to advocate for more resources from the state. Granular data can illuminate how funds can best be applied.

“We're going to see where the trends lie, and if 60% of our homeless population is experiencing mental health problems, how can we advocate for more support for our mental health agencies in town,” Donkersloot gave as an example.

One of the Grand County Local Homelessness Council’s long-term goals is to increase access to emergency housing. Donkersloot said she would love to see a center with facilities like lockers, showers, and a lounge area for people without shelter to escape heat or cold.

Such councils exist throughout the state, usually affiliated with a county government, and serve as community-level observers of needs, gatherers of information, and distributors of resources related to housing and homelessness.

“With some of the more current crises and situations that are going on, it’s becoming more and more evident that these resources are necessary and this council is needed,” said Donkersloot.

Local homelessness councils report to a regional “Continuum of Care,” of which there are three in Utah: one devoted to the Salt Lake Valley, one for three counties near Salt Lake County, and one for the rest of the 25 counties in Utah, including Grand County.

That means a wide range of communities, which may have very different needs, all report to the same Continuum of Care, which evaluates organizations and projects requesting funding and chooses which it will recommend receiving federal funding.

A state bill passed this year established the new Office of Homeless Services within the Department of Workforce Services, as well as a new position of State Homeless Services Coordinator, which has been filled by former Senator Wayne Niederhauser.

The state’s declared mission on homelessness is to make it “rare, brief, and non-recurring.”

In service of this mission, Utah takes a “housing-first” approach to individuals with multiple social service needs or other issues.
“You’re not judging someone if they have addiction disorders or for what they’ve done in their past, what you’re focusing on is housing them,” said Donkersloot.

Donkersloot is hopeful that Governor Spencer Cox’s long history of advocating for affordable housing and for the support of rural areas will mean strong support for the new Office of Homeless Services, and regional and state agencies will listen to communities’ needs.

“I think he’s putting in the work to make sure everyone’s voice is heard,” Donkersloot said.