



JUNE 2019

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND HOMELESSNESS SERVICE SYSTEMS



Justice Center
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center prepared this brief in partnership with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. The opinions and findings in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the members of the Council of State Governments.

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Cover and interior design by Mina Bellomy.



INTRODUCTION

Across the country, local law enforcement and homelessness service system leaders are grappling with the significant, often rising numbers of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, and they are seeking solutions. As first responders, law enforcement officers are frequently dispatched to address situations involving homelessness-related health emergencies or public safety challenges. In fact, in many communities, law enforcement agencies can be one of the few, if not the only, public agencies in regular contact with people experiencing homelessness. Lack of access to regular care for mental and physical health conditions and substance use disorders among people who are unsheltered can lead to frequent 911 calls, driving emergency, medical, and police responses.¹ At the same time, the national housing affordability crisis – a driving force behind the rise of unsheltered homelessness in many communities² – also puts strain on the homelessness service system to respond, often without the resources and funding to do so.

Historically, local laws and ordinances have penalized activities associated with living in unsheltered spaces, such as public urination and sleeping in public. These activities are often classified as misdemeanors, which result in arrests and fines that do not address the underlying issues. Left with few options but to arrest, disperse, or issue a citation, many officers experience frustration at what amounts to a revolving door between homelessness and the criminal justice system – a cycle that disproportionately affects people of color.³ This cycle can not only leave officers feeling ineffectual, it also exacerbates challenges faced by people who are jailed for behaviors relating to the experience of homelessness.⁴ These jail stays disrupt people’s health care and disconnect them from their communities, potentially worsening any underlying mental illnesses and substance use disorders, and creating additional barriers to their ability to secure housing. Alarming, of the 11 million people admitted to jail annually, nearly 1.65 million experienced homelessness the year prior.⁵

Recognizing that no one system can effectively address this problem alone, law enforcement and homelessness service system leaders are partnering to understand the scope of unsheltered homelessness in their communities and are beginning to develop coordinated strategies for responding. More work is still needed to strengthen these partnerships, but with the law enforcement and homelessness service systems both focused on this issue, local leaders have an opportunity to find common ground while acknowledging the different priorities of each system. While the law enforcement priority of maintaining public and officer safety is not inherently at odds with the homelessness service system’s focus on quickly housing people experiencing homelessness, these systems may sometimes find themselves at cross-purposes. The strategies outlined in this brief are intended to support these collaborative efforts to better understand each other and to address unsheltered homelessness, while reducing related contact with law enforcement.



CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS AND EMERGING SOLUTIONS

Too often, communities have limited options to support a person who is experiencing homelessness and to stabilize someone in crisis. The scarcity of decent, safe, and affordable housing contributes to an increase in unsheltered homelessness in many communities,⁶ including a rise in the formation of encampments.⁷ And while emergency shelters serve an important function, many communities lack sufficient beds or have high barriers to entry that deter people from coming into a shelter. Common barriers include strict sobriety restrictions and mandates to participate in treatment. Even when adequate affordable housing units are available in a community, they often exclude people who have criminal records.⁸

In response to these trends, law enforcement agencies are beginning to train officers on the causes and impacts of homelessness. Communities are also expanding the use of street outreach teams that pair officers with outreach workers to connect people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to services and housing. Yet, with few exceptions, these efforts are not operating at a large enough scale to meet the scope of the problem and may not incorporate the most effective solution to homelessness: quickly connecting people to permanent housing and appropriate services. Communities are finding that more comprehensive approaches are needed.

The strategies described here are based on community-wide efforts to implement **Housing First**⁹ approaches to reducing homelessness and repeated calls to law enforcement.¹⁰ They address communities' needs for more comprehensive approaches and include a key component of Housing First approaches: ensuring that people experiencing homelessness—including those who have serious mental illnesses, substance use disorders, and/or criminal justice system involvement—are quickly connected to housing with few, if any, preconditions to entry. Implementing these strategies often requires close coordination between law enforcement and homelessness service providers, as well as streamlined access to available, affordable housing for people who have contact with both the criminal justice and the homelessness services systems.

Key Terminology At-a-Glance

These terms are commonly used to describe housing and homelessness programs and services, and the partners who can help to implement them.

Affordable housing. Housing that costs less than 30 percent of the resident household's income. Housing may be affordable to people exiting homelessness through a variety of mechanisms: (1) it may be available in the private market without a subsidy, sometimes referred to as "naturally affordable" units; (2) people may be provided tenant-based rental assistance (e.g., Housing Choice voucher, HUD HOME tenant-based rental assistance) to rent a unit in the private market; or (3) below-market rate rent levels may be secured through public and private financing into the development itself (e.g., HUD-assisted multi-family housing, project-based rental subsidies, Low Income Housing Tax Credit).

Continuum of Care (CoC). A community-wide partnership of public agencies and community organizations that provide housing assistance and supportive services to people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

CoC Housing Inventory Count. A snapshot of a county, city, or region's inventory of homeless assistance program housing. The count includes the number of beds and units available to serve people who are experiencing homelessness, including people in shelters, transitional housing, and supportive housing.

Court-based diversion programs. Programs that divert eligible participants out of busy courts and correctional facilities into treatment and alternatives to incarceration.

Housing First. Practices through which people experiencing homelessness are connected to permanent housing swiftly and with few to no treatment preconditions, behavioral contingencies, or other barriers. Through housing interventions like supportive housing and rapid re-housing, individuals and families are connected to the tailored array of community services that can help them stay and succeed in their home and pursue economic advancement.

Low-barrier shelters. Aligned with Housing First approaches, these emergency shelters have few or no requirements for entry, such as sobriety, income, identification, curfews, and absence of criminal records.

Point-in-Time (PIT) count. A tally of people experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness on a single night, required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Each year, CoCs are mandated to count the number of people experiencing homelessness who are in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and Safe Havens. CoCs also must record the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in odd-numbered years.

Rapid re-housing. An intervention designed to help individuals and families that do not need intensive and ongoing supports to quickly exit homelessness and return to permanent housing. Assistance is offered without preconditions (e.g., absence of criminal record, employment, income, or sobriety) and the resources and services provided are tailored to the unique needs of the household.

Supportive housing. Combines non-time-limited affordable housing assistance with wrap-around supportive services for people experiencing homelessness, as well as other people with disabilities.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE LAW ENFORCEMENT AND HOMELESSNESS SERVICES PARTNERSHIPS

To better understand how law enforcement and homelessness service providers can partner most effectively, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center held a convening in August 2018, bringing together cross-system teams from 10 cities,¹¹ as well as federal and national partners. The convening was intended to help these local leaders take stock of common challenges, share innovative practices, and identify areas where future policy guidance and technical assistance would be beneficial. This brief highlights promising practices from the jurisdictions that attended the convening and describes emerging cross-sector strategies for best responding to people who experience unsheltered homelessness and have frequent contact with law enforcement.

Lessons from these jurisdictions suggest that effective partnerships between law enforcement and homelessness service providers can be achieved through the following strategies:

1. Develop shared goals, clearly define roles, and engage other critical stakeholders;
2. Use data to understand local need and assess progress;
3. Review and align local laws and ordinances to support the goals of the partnership;
4. Equip law enforcement officers and their homelessness services system counterparts with protocols and training; and
5. Divert people from the criminal justice system while supporting long-term stabilization.



1. Develop Shared Goals, Clearly Define Roles, and Engage Other Critical Stakeholders

An effective, collaborative, and community-wide response to unsheltered homelessness first requires that leaders in both law enforcement and the homelessness services system understand the importance and roles both systems play in addressing their common goals. These leaders can start to establish the foundation of a strong partnership by identifying these shared goals, metrics for tracking and assessing progress over time, and clear roles for each system's involvement. Both systems can also work to identify the resources they can offer to address their goals. Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or other written agreements are essential to establishing shared goals, roles, and responsibilities.

A critical element of this work is defining the most effective and appropriate roles for the partners involved, with decisions focused on what works best for helping to link people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to lasting solutions in each jurisdiction. In communities that can mobilize robust outreach efforts from within their homelessness service system, law enforcement may not need to play a significant outreach role but can still help inform and benefit from the partnership. For instance, when responding to a call for service involving a person experiencing homelessness, an officer would benefit from being able to connect this person to a homelessness outreach team, freeing the officer to respond to other calls. In other communities, law enforcement personnel may play more significant roles in outreach. In these situations, training of law enforcement personnel in effective outreach and engagement approaches, and in how to balance their outreach and enforcement efforts, is important.

In Practice

Several communities across the nation are already making strides toward effective interagency partnerships. In Wichita, Kansas, the police force and the homelessness services system have been working together for nearly a decade to address unsheltered homelessness.

Representatives from Wichita have said that their efforts rest on buy-in from leadership in multiple fields. For instance, the head of the Wichita Police Department's homeless outreach team is a member of the **Continuum of Care (CoC)** Coordinated Entry Workgroup, which drives the community's response to homelessness.

Another hallmark of strong collaboration includes identifying champions to build public support for the partnership and its identified goals. Elected officials and other local leaders can elevate the issue in the press and in public remarks. Enlisting critical stakeholders, like mayors, has proved successful in helping to significantly reduce homelessness among Veterans, for instance.¹²

Law enforcement and homelessness services partners can also look to other systems that have unique capacity and expertise to respond to the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, such as the behavioral health and juvenile justice systems. When these systems are engaged effectively, they can contribute resources that help create a comprehensive, community-wide solution to unsheltered homelessness. For instance, the behavioral health system typically oversees resources for people in behavioral health crisis, such as crisis beds in hospitals and crisis stabilization units, as well as community-based mental health and substance use treatment. These behavioral health resources are often needed among people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Additionally, given that youth experiencing homelessness are over-represented

in the juvenile justice system,¹³ it is critical to engage the juvenile justice system in efforts to address law enforcement interactions with youth experiencing homelessness.

Finally, people who have experienced homelessness can play a vital role in the development of the partnership's goals and the assessment of its impact. Given the disproportionate prevalence of people of color among those experiencing unsheltered homelessness¹⁴ and those involved in the criminal justice system nationally,¹⁵ it is particularly important that local leaders include their voices and perspectives in the development of the shared goals and outreach plans. When leaders meaningfully incorporate the expertise of people with lived experience, they are better equipped to be responsive to the needs of people who have experienced homelessness, to improve service participation, and to maintain a successful interagency partnership.

2. Use Data to Understand Local Needs and Assess Progress

Law enforcement agencies and homelessness service providers need data to identify the scope and needs of their shared population. Leaders from both systems can look to **Point-in-Time (PIT) count** data and other available data on the number and size of local encampments to understand the scale of unsheltered homelessness in their communities. Law enforcement agencies can utilize data on calls for service and arrest to quantify the number of calls and arrests involving people who are living in encampments or otherwise experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

One way that jurisdictions are beginning to understand their population's needs is by matching data between the law enforcement and homelessness services systems. This matching should be informed by a written agreement that defines clear parameters for the uses of any shared data or information and protects the privacy of individuals. This analysis helps agencies appreciate the size of the shared population and their frequency of contacts with both systems. It also helps establish a baseline number of calls and arrests for this shared population against which to measure progress over time. Data matching can also allow both systems to identify a subset of people experiencing homelessness who have the most repeat encounters with law enforcement and can be targeted for outreach and engagement in services to prevent further contacts with officers.

Just as important as matching data between the two systems is disaggregating calls for service data by race, ethnicity, gender, and age. This analysis illustrates how the demographic breakdown of this group compares to that of the larger community. The results can inform staffing for homelessness crisis and housing services, thereby leading communities to take steps to ensure that these services include staff who reflect the demographic makeup of the target population. The analysis can also inform the types of housing

In Practice

The Honolulu Police Department (HPD) tracks calls for service that involve people experiencing homelessness and has found that 40 percent of all calls fall into this category. As part of its partnership with the local homelessness services system, called Health, Efficiency, Long-term Partnerships (HELP), the HPD is also tracking connections to shelter as a measure of success.

Since the implementation of the HELP outreach team, the number of connections to shelter has increased each year: the HELP program connected just 17 people to emergency shelter in 2017, then 178 people in 2018, and another 101 in the first 3 months of 2019 alone.



approaches being offered, improving communities' ability to tailor services to reflect the norms, culture, and specific needs of the population served, including youth and women experiencing homelessness, who have unique service needs.¹⁶ Finally, the partner agencies can benefit from examining outcome data (e.g., disposition of calls for service, connections to care) according to demographics and assessing whether outcomes vary by sub-population.

3. Review and Align Local Laws and Ordinances to Support the Goals of the Partnerships

In response to the crisis of unsheltered homelessness, communities often turn to legal measures and enforcement actions that don't create lasting solutions for the people who are unsheltered. For example, there has been an increase in "acts of living" laws—local ordinances that prohibit sleeping, eating, sitting, or panhandling in public spaces—in communities across the country in recent years.¹⁷ In some communities, these laws are being marshaled to implement zero-tolerance approaches to unsheltered homelessness, which generally yield frequent contacts between police and people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. These types of local ordinances have gained national attention, as evident in the recent *Martin v. Boise* case, in which homelessness service system advocates challenged a City of Boise, Idaho, ordinance that penalized sleeping in public. In April 2019, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled the ordinance unconstitutional, concluding that people experiencing homelessness cannot be punished for sleeping outside on public property in the absence of adequate alternatives.¹⁸

In Practice

Many communities across the country have instituted court programs for people experiencing homelessness, which typically divert people from jail to treatment and supervision in the community.

Searching Out Solutions, from USICH, describes such programs and highlights several communities' efforts, including Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, California, and Houston, Texas.

Drawing lessons from cases such as *Martin v. Boise*, law enforcement and homelessness services system leaders can examine how their local ordinances may inadvertently contribute to high rates of law enforcement contacts and arrests among people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Leaders from both systems can work with public officials to determine whether it may be useful to appeal or amend ordinances to reduce arrests.

Jurisdictions are also beginning to institute **court-based diversion programs** to address the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Several communities have established problem-solving courts that handle cases involving low-level offenses for people experiencing homelessness that serve as alternatives to incarceration. The problem-solving court model differs from traditional courts in that it is designed to focus on one type of offense by the person accused of a crime to reduce criminal offending through therapeutic and interdisciplinary approaches, while also expediting case processing and reducing caseloads.¹⁹

4. Equip Law Enforcement Officers and Their Homelessness Services System Counterparts with Protocols and Training

Clearly written protocols and policies are vital to guide officer interactions with people who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness or living in an encampment. This written guidance and related training may cover multiple example scenarios that instruct officers how to make handoffs to the homelessness services system. To ensure that the protocols and policies reflect evidence-based practices for addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness (often with behavioral health conditions), law enforcement agencies can consider developing them in partnership with leaders from the homelessness services and behavioral health systems.

Written protocols are effective when paired with basic training for all officers on mental illnesses, substance use disorders, homelessness, and de-escalation techniques. In addition to these general subject areas, training may cover various sub-populations of people experiencing homelessness, including women and unaccompanied youth, and protocols for responding to these groups.²⁰ Officers and homelessness services system providers can also benefit from training on how best to partner with street outreach workers to humanely address encampments and connect people experiencing homelessness with services and housing.

Training is an opportunity to familiarize officers with available crisis responses, diversion options, long-term services, and housing, as well as the criteria for those services and programs and relevant local contacts. Furthermore, featuring trainers or presenters who have personal experience of homelessness and are demographically representative of that population in your community can help build understanding among officers. While homelessness services providers may have a better understanding of many of these resources and services for people experiencing homelessness, they can also benefit from cross-training with their law enforcement counterparts. This training could be an opportunity for them to gain additional information on who best to engage in different aspects of the partnership (e.g., education on best partners for an outreach team) and what existing partnerships law enforcement leaders may have already established with other systems, like the behavioral health and juvenile justice systems.

5. Divert People from the Criminal Justice System and Support Long-Term Stabilization

Interagency partners around the country are finding that shared goals, data, protocols, and training must be paired with a continuum of services to provide alternatives to arrest and address the underlying causes of unsheltered homelessness and repeated contacts with law enforcement. As a result, communities have sought to develop program capacity in four specific areas:

In Practice

Sharing protocols publicly ensures transparency about police interactions with people experiencing homelessness. In Los Angeles, California, the homelessness services system publicly [shares guidance on its website](#) for area law enforcement agencies to use to develop their own policies and protocols.



1. Effective crisis response that draws on law enforcement, homelessness services, and behavioral health resources;
2. Proactive outreach;
3. Long-term solutions to homelessness, including permanent housing; and
4. Strategies for responding to encampments with best practices.

Effective Crisis Response

As part of an effective response to homelessness, law enforcement must have access to options other than arrest or dispersal to address homelessness. Local hospitals often have a limited number of crisis beds, creating long waits.²¹ And in many cases, this shortage leaves officers with the feeling they have no or limited options other than to arrest. Crisis stabilization units (CSUs) are a promising approach, as they offer an alternative to arrest and hospitalization and provide a place to stabilize a person experiencing a mental health crisis, usually for up to 23 hours. While this model varies from place to place, CSUs generally offer individual counseling, mental health assessment, case management services, and connection to local resources.

Low-barrier shelters can also provide safety while permanent housing is being secured. Law enforcement agencies can work with homelessness services system providers to ensure that shelters are accessible for people who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness and have frequent contact with law enforcement agencies.

Specialized law enforcement teams are also part of an effective crisis response. These teams are often part of a local police-mental health collaboration (PMHC) and are used to implement and sustain PMHC response models such as Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) programs, Co-responder models, and mobile crisis units.²² Given the high

incidence of mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorders among people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, these specialized teams often play an important role in responding to health crises that result in emergency calls. CIT teams are dispatched to calls for service, relieving the strain on other officers, defusing challenging interactions, improving public safety, and decreasing the likelihood that these calls result in arrest. Co-responder teams pair a clinician with an officer who has received intensive training. They jointly respond to calls for service involving people who have mental illnesses or are in crisis, including people experiencing homelessness. Mobile crisis units are teams of clinicians who meet officers on the scene to de-escalate crises and connect people with mental illnesses to services. Due to their advanced training, these teams can more effectively manage encounters with people experiencing homelessness and free up patrol officers to answer other calls. Collaboration between law enforcement and behavioral health systems can take many forms, and law enforcement agencies can bring together different response models to effectively respond to people with mental illnesses who interact with law enforcement. Law enforcement agencies that are already developing effective responses to people with mental illnesses through PMHCs are uniquely qualified to develop similar types of partnerships with the homelessness services system.²³

In Practice

The State of Hawaii and City of Honolulu mandated that all emergency shelters implement Housing First approaches and tied funding to provider performance, with one of the metrics for success being connections to permanent housing as quickly as possible.

As a result, in Oahu, emergency shelter lengths of stay decreased approximately 20 percent, and the number of people exiting shelter to permanent housing increased 48 percent between 2017 and 2018.

Proactive Identification, Outreach, and Engagement in Housing and Services

Outreach teams can play a critical role in engaging and assessing the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. An ongoing relationship between outreach workers and people experiencing homelessness is necessary to establish trust and encourage people to agree to participate in services and housing. In many communities, homelessness service providers partner with law enforcement to proactively outreach to people experiencing homelessness when they are not in crisis. Law enforcement officers are in a unique position to help with identifying people that the homelessness services system can support. For these communities, it's critical to establish and define each partner's appropriate roles in making connections with people experiencing homelessness based on the local needs and resources and on best practices for building trust. Over time, with trust in place, outreach teams can engage individuals in housing and services, with the goal of reducing future contact with law enforcement.

Wichita Police Department Driving Efforts to Reduce Unsheltered Homelessness

In Wichita, Kansas, the centerpiece of the collaboration between law enforcement and the homelessness services system is proactive outreach to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. In 2011, a law enforcement officer led an effort to partner with the homelessness services system and [create the homeless outreach \(H.O.T.\) team](#). Operated by the Wichita Police Department, the H.O.T. team brings the homelessness services system's resources to the street, including by educating people experiencing unsheltered homelessness about available services and housing and by connecting them to these resources. Responsible for responding to all 911 calls regarding people experiencing homelessness, the H.O.T. team seeks to keep individuals out of jail if possible, favoring diversion to services or shelters.

Recently, the H.O.T. team identified the need to connect people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to services for substance use disorders. In response, the H.O.T. team expanded its outreach to connect people to substance use treatment and case management services. The H.O.T. team and the Sheriff's Department participate in the annual PIT count, helping to identify people experiencing homelessness in remote parts of the community. H.O.T. team members conduct outreach in places where unsheltered homelessness is likely to occur—places that can be unsafe for outreach workers to visit on their own—such as under bridges or in abandoned buildings. The H.O.T. team helps connect people to homelessness services, engages in case conferencing with the homelessness service system, and shares information on cases to facilitate coordination of services.

The Wichita Police Department has seen [an annual decline](#) in calls for service for people experiencing homelessness since the H.O.T. team was established. Each year, the partners develop performance targets and track progress against agreed-upon metrics. The H.O.T. team has set a goal of housing 100 people experiencing homelessness annually and has surpassed this target each year. This collaborative team has played an important role in helping decrease the overall number of people experiencing chronic homelessness in Wichita, which [dropped 77 percent](#) between 2011 and 2018.

Leadership buy-in and comprehensive policies and training for officers are critical to the success of the H.O.T. team. In addition to the Mental Health First Aid training that all Wichita police officers receive, H.O.T. team officers must participate in a weeklong Crisis Intervention Team training, supplemented with two days of formal training on case law, policies, and standard operating procedures. Training for H.O.T. officers includes three to six months of on-the-job training to understand community partnerships.



Long-Term Solutions to Homelessness, Including Permanent Housing

An effective response to homelessness requires an array of housing and services options that support people to address their challenges and needs, including substance use disorders, and chronic health and mental health conditions. Appropriate services and supports may include intensive case management, mental health treatment, substance use treatment services, and general medical care, which is especially important for the subset of people who have lived on the street for long periods and often have chronic health conditions.

Jurisdictions that provide a variety of permanent housing options—including **supportive housing**, **rapid re-housing**, and **affordable housing**—can meet the diverse needs of people experiencing homelessness. A type of low-barrier housing, supportive housing features voluntary services, where participation is not a condition of residency.²⁴ Over time, individuals stabilize in supportive housing and experience reduced rates of arrest.²⁵

In communities across the country, local homelessness services providers have developed coordinated entry processes to standardize the way individuals and families at risk of or experiencing homelessness are assessed and referred to available housing and services. Regardless of the point of entry into the homelessness service system—whether through a crisis hotline, outreach team, or emergency shelter—the individual or family undergoes the same assessment and referral process.

Aligned with Housing First approaches, these coordinated entry processes can streamline access to permanent housing for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, resulting in faster housing placements. For instance, a more intensive intervention like supportive housing is typically reserved for people who have the most significant service and care needs (e.g., serious mental illnesses, substance use disorders, chronic medical conditions) and/or have experienced long periods of unsheltered homelessness. Less intensive, shorter-term housing and supports (e.g., rapid re-housing) are offered to people who have fewer service needs.

In order to identify any major gaps in a community's housing options or services, it is important to compare the inventory of affordable housing options and available services with the size and needs of the population shared by the law enforcement and homelessness services systems. The homelessness services system could leverage its annual **Housing Inventory Count** and other system data to assess the number of units available and vacancy rates by housing type and quantify the gap between housing that's available and what is needed. For instance, an assessment of these data may reveal that the community's biggest gap is in longer-term, more intensive housing models, like supportive housing. In such an instance, the homelessness services system may need to create additional supportive housing units and/or prioritize existing units.

In conducting an inventory of affordable housing options and available services, law enforcement and homelessness services system leaders may also consider examining eligibility criteria for these programs, focusing on any exclusion of people who have had contact with the criminal justice system. Leaders in the homelessness services system can play a critical role in removing such exclusions and/or setting aside housing units for people with prior criminal justice involvement. A comprehensive inventory of services also includes available mental health and substance use treatment programs in the community (e.g., Assertive Community Treatment), with information on program capacity, waitlists, and other indicators of available supply.

Philadelphia's Pioneering Model to Respond to Encampments

Nearly two decades ago, Philadelphia residents raised vocal concerns about unsheltered homelessness and panhandling. In response, the city adopted the Sidewalk Behavior Ordinance, which formalized a partnership between homelessness services and police in addressing street homelessness and mandated that a person on the street in need of services be connected with services and housing even if law enforcement is the first responder.

Today, the City has a "service detail"—part of a specialized team dedicated to working with people on the street. Its responsibilities under [the statute](#) include (1) determining whether a person stopped under the ordinance needs help from social services or medical providers; (2) contacting outreach workers to evaluate the person in need of social services; (3) coordinating with the outreach worker to get the person to appropriate services, including by offering transportation; and (4) participating in training (such as CIT training) about effectively handling situations where people are in crisis.

This partnership has evolved with community needs. In 2017, when opioid overdose deaths began to rise, the partners recognized that people with opioid use disorders often also had histories of homelessness and mental health system involvement. In response, the Office of Homeless Services (OHS) and the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) deployed pairs of officers and outreach workers to the neighborhoods hit hardest by the opioid epidemic.

In 2018, OHS, PPD, and Philadelphia's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services (DBHIDS) launched the Encampment Resolution Pilot, an effort to humanely respond to encampments in the Kensington neighborhood. The pilot featured close collaboration between behavioral health and homelessness service system leaders, law enforcement, and housing and substance use treatment providers. Outreach teams [assessed the needs](#) of people living in the two encampments—finding that a majority suffered from substance use disorders (93 percent) and co-occurring mental illnesses (65 percent)—and connected them to services and housing. The City dedicated 90 low-barrier shelter beds to the Encampment Resolution Pilot. This housing was proximate to the encampments, helping to ensure that encampment residents would participate.

The pilot partners recognized that emergency housing would be critical to the pilot's success and sought to limit the scope of the intervention based on available housing resources. The City used a list of individuals residing in the encampments at the outset of the pilot to prioritize them for available housing. Ultimately, 126 people were placed in housing and/or connected to substance use treatment. In addition to the strong cross-system partnerships, other components that contributed to Philadelphia's success included intensive outreach, ongoing case management, and streamlined access to substance use treatment. The pilot waived identification and pre-authorization requirements for services and offered services even while working through any insurance coverage issues.

At the center of this longstanding cross-system partnership is data sharing. In 2017, PPD, DBHIDS, and OHS began to match their data, revealing that many of the people experiencing homelessness in the Kensington neighborhood had histories of jail involvement and mental health and substance use treatment. The partners developed a shared list of people who had frequent contacts with these systems to facilitate outreach and engagement. As a result, the City has been able to stem the growth in the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Kensington.

Philadelphia also provides a comprehensive continuum of services and affordable housing to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness who interact with law enforcement. For instance, OHS committed to creating 100 permanent supportive housing units targeted to people with opioid use disorders. DBHIDS offers recovery services to residents, including Medication Assisted Treatment, an evidence-based practice for people with opioid use disorders. OHS has also focused on increasing the City's number of low-barrier shelter beds, with help from a local housing provider that has experience in providing substance use treatment and addressing homelessness. The City has also invested in increasing its supply of recovery housing.



Coordinated Strategy for Responding to Encampments

Law enforcement, homelessness services system, and other leaders are beginning to come together to develop comprehensive action plans for responding to encampments in a manner that reduces harm, protects public and officer safety, and seeks to connect people to affordable housing opportunities and services. Public health is an important consideration in encampments, which often lack running water or sanitation services and contribute to food-borne illnesses and the transmission of communicable diseases.²⁶ As such, public health departments are typically engaged to assess and address the health issues of people living in encampments. A cross-system action plan to address encampments should ideally include short-term housing for residents, such as low-barrier shelter, and a pathway to permanent housing through the local coordinated entry process.²⁷ Best practices include law enforcement working in coordination with outreach teams, and communicating in advance with residents about any plan to clear the encampment.²⁸ Successful action plans also include ongoing, coordinated outreach and needs assessments in encampments by the homelessness services system and law enforcement.

Conclusion

Law enforcement and homelessness services system providers are beginning to partner in more communities to appropriately address the needs, safety, and living conditions of people who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The August 2018 convening held by USICH and the CSG Justice Center was an important first step toward sharing emerging strategies. Jurisdictions can use the information highlighted in this brief to determine what emerging strategies are best suited to bolster their own efforts to better respond to unsheltered homelessness and repeated contacts with law enforcement. Ultimately, a successful collaboration between law enforcement and the homelessness services system can play a critical role in a community's effort to end homelessness, resulting in reduced arrests, fewer repeat encounters with law enforcement, and increased connections to low-barrier shelters, behavioral health services, and permanent housing.

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND HOMELESSNESS SERVICE SYSTEMS

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