

# Allentown Homeless Commission

Strategic Plan  
2021



City of Allentown  
Commission on Homelessness  
March 2021

## Allentown Homeless Commission

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Mayor, City of Allentown

# Introduction

On February 5, 2020, the Allentown City Council, at the direction of Mayor Ray O’Connell, created the Allentown Commission on Homelessness with four primary purposes:

- 1. Advise the Mayor and City Council** and make recommendations on issues related to people experiencing homelessness in the City of Allentown;
- 2. Educate the public** on the issues of homelessness and advocate for policies and legislation that can help people experiencing homelessness;
- 3. Coordinate efforts** of local government agencies, nonprofits and faith-based providers who address the issue of homelessness;
- 4. Develop and implement a Strategic Plan** that will prevent and end homelessness within the City of Allentown.

The Commission adopted a Vision Statement, which states that *“We envision a day in which every person living in the City of Allentown has safe and affordable housing”*. The Commission has met monthly to develop a Strategic Plan that includes recommendations on how to bring about this Vision in the near future.

Through this process, we have found that solutions exist. Communities throughout the country have reduced homelessness to “functional zero” by instituting collaborative leadership and investing in proven strategies to help people get and keep permanent housing.

We’ve learned from some of our nation’s experts on how to best address homelessness, including Dr. Marybeth Shinn, a professor at Vanderbilt University, who states that *“Homelessness is a choice - not a choice by people sleeping on the streets, but a choice by the rest of us to look the other way.”*

We appreciate the many leaders in the City of Allentown who have decided not to look the other way, but instead are committed to implementing strategies that will prevent and end homelessness for the families and individuals residing in our great city.

“Since the founding of our country, “home” has been the center of the American dream. Stable housing is the foundation upon which everything else in a family’s or individual’s life is built – without a safe, affordable place to live, it is much tougher to maintain good health, get a good education or reach your potential.”

— President Barak Obama  
*Opening Doors – Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*



# Homelessness in America

According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), housing plays an essential platform for human and community development. **“Stable housing is the foundation upon which people build their lives”**, the 2015 USICH Report states. “Absent a safe, decent, affordable place to live, it is next to impossible to achieve good health, positive educational outcomes, or reach one’s economic potential”.

Indeed, for many persons living in poverty, the lack of stable housing leads to costly cycling through crisis-driven systems like emergency rooms, psychiatric hospitals, detox centers, and jails. By the same token, stable housing provides an ideal platform for the delivery of health care and other social services.

Researchers have also focused on housing stability as an important ingredient for the success of children and youth in school. **When children have a stable home, they are more likely to succeed socially, emotionally, and academically.**

Homelessness takes many forms, and often looks contrary to the typical stereotype:

- Long-term, chronically homeless adults in America certainly need our services, but they make up only 15% of those people experiencing homelessness;
- One recent study found that **46% of people living in emergency shelters were intact families**;
- The same study found that 19% of people in emergency shelters were fleeing domestic violence (Shinn, M., 2020);
- And according to the USICH, **the age at which people are at the highest risk of entering a homeless shelter in the United States is infancy.**

Youth experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable:

- **Up to 40% of youth who experience homelessness identify as LGBTQ+**, with many of them reporting that they have been kicked out of their home due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Cray, et.al., 2013);
- Many homeless youth end up “couch surfing” from one place to another, where they are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking or drug and alcohol abuse;
- **Children from families experiencing housing instability have an increased risk for entry into foster care**, and shelter stays of 90 days or more are linked with increased likelihood (40%) of entry into the child welfare system (ACYF, 2012).

Contrary to what most people believe, **half of the adults who experience sheltered homelessness do not suffer from severe mental illness** or any other type of disability. These people are typically homeless because of a short-term crisis, like losing a job or a medical emergency. And most people emerge from homelessness and return to housing.

It’s been estimated that **one out of every 14 Americans reported that there was a time in their lives when they had been homeless** and slept in a shelter, abandoned building or public place (Link et al., 1994). But it hasn’t always been this way in our country.



The age at which people are at the highest risk of entering a homeless shelter in the United States is infancy.

— USICH, 2015

# Homelessness in America

## History of Homelessness

Homelessness has not always been widespread in the United States. Until the early 1970's, most American communities had a sufficient supply of rental housing that was affordable to low-income families. As a result, homelessness among children and youth did not exist in the same way it does today.

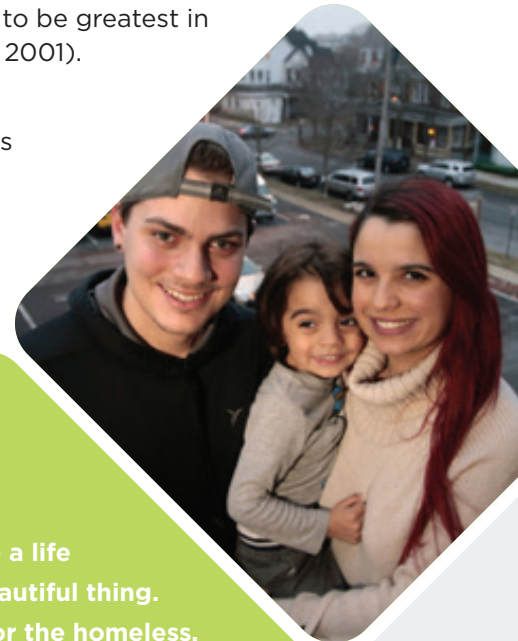
Over the last thirty-five years, the number of people experiencing homelessness in America has remained high even in good economic times. This was in part due to a convergence of several key factors:

- the loss of affordable housing and increase in foreclosures;
- the inability for wages and public assistance to keep pace with rising housing costs and the cost of living;
- the closing of state psychiatric institutions without the concomitant creation of sufficient community-based housing and services.

The rapid increase in income inequality that began during the 1980s has also contributed to changes in local housing markets, driving up the cost of renting even a modest home or apartment. Housing affordability problems and homelessness tend to be greatest in communities with higher levels of income inequality (Quigley, J., et al, 2001).

Studies have shown that the rates of homelessness are higher in the United States than in most of Western Europe, in part because millions of extremely low-income American households do not receive rental assistance or have access to affordable housing, putting them at risk for housing instability and the types of crises that can result in homelessness (Shinn, M., 2020).

Given these broad societal changes, it may seem that there is little that an individual city can do to end homelessness. But there are currently over 80 cities and communities in the United States that have publicly committed to reducing homelessness to functional zero ([www.builtforzero.com](http://www.builtforzero.com)). We feel that Allentown can make a similar commitment.



**“To save a life  
is a real and beautiful thing.  
To make a home for the homeless,  
yes, it is a thing that must be good;  
whatever the world may say,  
it cannot be wrong.”**

— Vincent Van Gough

# Homelessness in Allentown

## Homelessness in Allentown

It's estimated by the Eastern PA Continuum of Care that Allentown currently has over 1,426 people who are experiencing homelessness. The Allentown School District, which uses the Department of Education's broader definition of homelessness, reported that 1,095 children experienced homelessness in 2019, making Allentown home to the 4th largest homeless youth population in the state.

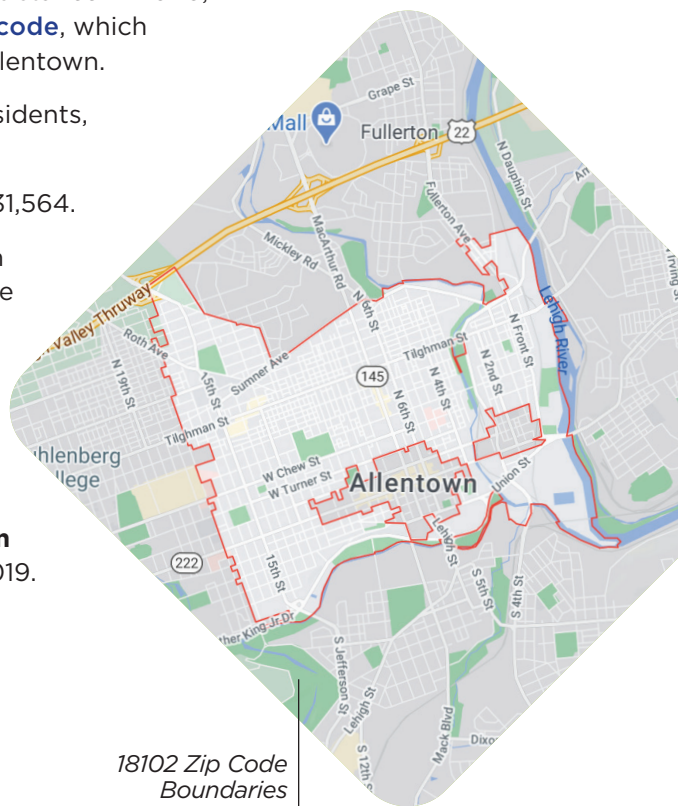
In 2020, 527 people and families in Allentown requested housing assistance through the Coordinated Entry System. Of these:



**Only 11% of these people were able to be helped by our local government or a local provider last year.** The other 89% were left to fend for themselves. This is primarily due to a shortage of funding for emergency shelter beds, transitional housing options or more permanent housing resources, such as Rapid Rehousing, Permanent Supportive Housing or general affordable housing units.

Of the people from Allentown who requested housing assistance in 2020, **70% of these stated that they resided in the 18102 zip code**, which is the neighborhood that surrounds central downtown Allentown.

- This zip code has a current population of 49,779 residents, representing 40% of the city's population.
- The median household income of this zip code is \$31,564.
- According to HUD, a family of four making less than \$31,950 in Allentown is considered Very Low Income and qualifies for Section 8 Housing.
- **This means that average rents must be available at \$789 per month** if a household is to spend 30% or less of their after-tax income on housing.
- **Unfortunately, the average rent for an apartment in Allentown is \$1,239**, which increased by 8% over 2019.



*18102 Zip Code Boundaries*

# Homelessness in Allentown

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, our city may begin to see an increase in the number of individuals and families who will lose their housing due to loss of employment. Once Federal and State eviction moratoriums are lifted, and unemployment payments run out, it's feared that additional people and families will be facing eviction and possibly homelessness.

This Strategic Plan is composed of five basic strategies, which includes efforts to prevent homelessness as well as to expand resources to assist those who do lose their housing. The Plan will require a commitment from all elected officials and a collaborative approach by those working in the field. In addition, new permanent funding streams will need to be identified to pay for the initiatives in this plan. Without additional, sustainable funding, homelessness will continue to exist in our community.

People in Allentown who enrolled in the Coordinated Entry System in 2020 were from these zip codes:

ZIP CODE	# REQUESTS
18101	37
18102	371
18103	56
18104	23
18105	4
18106	9
18109	27

“If sometimes our poor people have had to die of starvation, it is not that God didn't care for them, but because you and I didn't give, were not instruments of love in the hands of God, to give them that bread, to give them that clothing; because we did not recognize Him, when once more Christ came in distressing disguise, in the hungry man, in the lonely man, in the homeless child, and seeking our shelter.”

— Mother Teresa



*The Dwellings – Tallahassee, Florida*

## STRATEGY #1



### Prevent Homelessness through Rental Assistance

Most people experiencing homelessness do so because of a short-term crisis, such as a medical emergency, a lost job or a family separation. Helping families weather this short-term crisis is the most cost effective way to reduce homelessness, while also having the best outcomes for families and children.

**1. Expand Rental Assistance and Housing Vouchers** — Work with existing Providers to help pay past due rent & utilities for people experiencing short-term housing crisis to help families and individuals remain in their current housing.

a. In 2021, coordinate with Lehigh County to best utilize the \$11.5M in new federal funding for rental assistance.

**2. Provide Flexible Assistance Funds** — Federal rental assistance funds often have restrictions that limit the number of families and individuals who can be helped. The Commission sees the need to expand the availability of flexible assistance funds to help families in need of short-term housing or utility support who may not qualify for other grant programs.

a. Included in this effort would be additional support for the **Allentown School District's Rooster Relief Fund** which is administered by staff and volunteers in the Allentown School District and provides flexible rental assistance to needy families in the city.

## STRATEGY #2



### Landlord Engagement Initiative

Homeless renters face many barriers to obtaining housing, including bad credit, stigma and unaffordable or inadequate housing stock. The vision of the Landlord Engagement Plan is to develop relationships with willing landlords who would be willing to work with individuals and organizations to safely house individuals who are homeless or facing imminent homelessness.

**1. Housing Navigators** — This promising strategy utilizes Housing Navigators to recruit landlords who will rent to individuals and families that have experienced homelessness. Landlords are offered incentives, such as the payment of first and last month's rent and security deposits, or a certain dollar amount each month.

**2. Landlord-Tenant Mediation services** are offered, and a Risk Mitigation Fund is established to cover repairs or other issues that might arise.

**3. Data Base of Available Units** — This strategy calls for the building of a data base of available units that could be accessed by homeless services providers to assist individuals and families in a housing search. A software program like that offered by Padmission would enable providers to centralize landlord relationships, expand housing opportunities, track performance and reduce housing search times.



## STRATEGY #3

### Expand Housing Options



One of the root causes of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing in Allentown. Expanding affordable housing can take several forms, based on the circumstances of the person facing or experiencing homelessness. Included in our strategy are efforts to expand the following housing options:

- 1. The Rapid Rehousing** program is a primary solution for ending homelessness that has been demonstrated to be effective in getting people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing and keeping them there. **Rapid Rehousing** provides **short-term rental assistance and supportive services** designed to help people obtain housing quickly and address the issues that caused them to become homeless.
  - a. Low-Barrier of Entry** — Rapid Rehousing takes a Housing-First approach, which assumes that people need stable housing before they can confront other challenges they may be facing. As such, housing is offered without preconditions, such as employment, income, absence of criminal record or sobriety and the services are tailored for the needs of the person.
  - b. Better Outcomes** — Research demonstrates that those who receive Rapid Rehousing assistance are **homeless for shorter periods of time** than those assisted with shelter or transitional housing.
  - c. Less Expensive** — Rapid Rehousing is also less expensive than shelters or transitional housing and has better outcomes for children in school.
- 2. Permanent Supportive Housing** is an intervention that combines affordable housing assistance with voluntary support services to address the needs of chronically homeless adults who typically suffer from long-term disabilities. These services are designed to build independent living skills and connect people with community-based health care, treatment and employment services.
  - a. Research shows** that investments in Permanent Supportive Housing have helped decrease the number of chronically homeless individuals by 20% nationally since 2007.
  - b. Research has shown** that Permanent Supportive Housing **improves health outcomes and lowers public costs** associated with crisis services in shelters, hospitals, jails and prisons.
- 3. Transitional Housing through a Tiny Home Village** — Many communities have developed a Tiny Home Village to provide transitional housing for people experiencing homelessness. These Tiny Home Villages provide affordable housing coupled with support services to address issues of employment, mental health, physical health and drug & alcohol issues. Successful Tiny Home Villages involve their residents in the daily management and security of the site, and build a sense of community among members.

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## STRATEGY #3

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### 4. Additional Housing Options should be provided for various sub-groups of people experiencing homelessness, including:

**a. Housing for Single Mothers with Children** — create housing opportunities for single mothers with children who are experiencing homelessness. National studies tell us that 46% of people living in emergency shelters are families, and our city currently faces a shortage of housing appropriate for homeless families.

**b. Support for Youth in the Foster Care System** — Research has shown that 40% of youth who transition out of the foster care system at the age of 18 experience homelessness within one year. Strategies that help youth and young adults learn essential life skills and build permanent relationships are essential in helping youth in foster care successfully transition to adulthood.

**c. LGBTQ Youth** — Up to 40% of youth who are homeless identify as LGBTQ. Housing and support services that specifically target LGBTQ youth is a proven strategy to help these young people transition into stable permanent housing.

**d. Housing for people leaving hospitals or prison without an address** — There are individuals who are eligible to be released from a hospital or a prison who are not released because they do not have a permanent address. Providing housing for this group of people would not only help them move out of these institutions, but would also save taxpayers significant funds.

**5. Year-Round Emergency Shelter** — Our city currently has an emergency shelter that operates at the Allentown YMCA during the winter months. The need exists for a year-round shelter to provide emergency beds for individuals and families who are literally homeless.

“Most homeless kids are on the streets because they have been forced by circumstances that cause them to think that they are safer there than in any home they once knew.”

— Jewel



## STRATEGY #4



### Develop Sustainable New Funding Streams

None of these initiatives will be able to be expanded without identifying new sources of funding that are sustainable year after year. Included in this are the following:

1. **Public Funding Options** — Work with City, County and State officials to explore opportunities to develop new funding streams to provide affordable housing and support services for people experiencing homelessness.
2. **Public/Private Funding Opportunities** — Work with local philanthropists to discuss opportunities to utilize federal tax credit programs to leverage private dollars to fund programs and services to end homelessness in Allentown.
  - a. One such opportunity is the **Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program (LIHTC)**, managed by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA). LIHTC allocates tax credits to the states that developers use to raise capital for the construction of affordable rental housing. In exchange for receiving the tax credits, developers agree to keep rents affordable for a number of years in the apartments that are built.

## STRATEGY #5



### Improve Community-wide Coordination using Data and Evidence-based Solutions

1. **Work with the Regional Homeless Advisory Board (RHAB) and additional stakeholders to improve Coordination** — coordinate efforts with the Lehigh Valley RHAB and engage additional stakeholders to ensure buy-in on the strategy and implementation. Representatives should be recruited from the following stakeholders:
  - a. Government entities, including: Lehigh County Department of Human Services, including Departments of Mental Health and Drug & Alcohol; Lehigh County Corrections Department; Allentown Housing Authority; Veteran Affairs
  - b. Local Providers, Hospitals, Housing Developers & Contractors
  - c. Local Funders — Private and Public
  - d. People who have experienced homelessness
2. **Built for Zero** — Consider adopting the Built for Zero campaign to develop a by-name list of those currently experiencing homelessness and hold bi-weekly meetings with Providers to move these people into either Emergency Shelters, Transitional Housing, Rapid Rehousing, or Permanent Supportive Housing.