

HEADWAY

How Houston Moved 25,000 People From the Streets Into Homes of Their Own

The nation's fourth-largest city hasn't solved homelessness, but its remarkable progress can suggest a way forward.

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One steamy morning last July, Ana Rausch commandeered a shady corner of a parking lot on the northwest side of Houston. Downing a jumbo iced coffee, she issued brisk orders to a dozen outreach workers toting iPads. Her attention was fixed on a highway underpass nearby, where a handful of people were living in tents and cardboard lean-tos. As a vice president of Houston's Coalition for the Homeless, Ms. Rausch was there to move them out.

I had come to watch the process and, more broadly, to see Houston's approach to homelessness, which has won a lot of praise. At first, I couldn't figure out why this particular underpass had been colonized. The sound of trucks revving their engines ricocheted against the concrete walls like rifle shots; and most of Houston's homeless services were miles away. But then Ms. Rausch's team, and a few camp residents, pointed out the nearby fast food outlets, the Shell station with a convenience store, and the Planet Fitness, where a \$10 monthly membership meant access to showers and outlets for charging phones.

It also wasn't initially visible what distinguished this encampment clearance from the ones in cities like Los Angeles and Austin, where the number of homeless people has been skyrocketing along with frustrations. The difference couldn't be seen because it had already happened. For more than a month, Ms. Rausch and her colleagues had been coordinating with Harris County officials, as well as with the mayor's office and local landlords. They had visited the encampment and talked to people living there, so that now, as tents were being dismantled, the occupants could move directly into one-bedroom apartments, some for a year, others for longer. In other words, the people living in the encampment would not be consigned to homeless shelters, cited for trespassing or scattered to the winds, but, rather, given a home.



An outreach worker talking to a woman in downtown Houston in April. Finding people housing starts by gathering information. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

During the last decade, Houston, the nation's fourth most populous city, has moved more than 25,000 homeless people directly into apartments and houses. The overwhelming majority of them have remained housed after two years. The number of people deemed homeless in the Houston region has been cut by 63 percent since 2011, according to the latest numbers from local officials. Even judging by the more modest metrics registered in a 2020 federal report, Houston did more than twice as well as the rest of the country at reducing homelessness over the previous decade. Ten years ago, homeless veterans, one of the categories that the federal government tracks, waited 720 days and had to navigate 76 bureaucratic steps to get from the street into permanent housing with support from social service counselors. Today, a streamlined process means the wait for housing is 32 days.

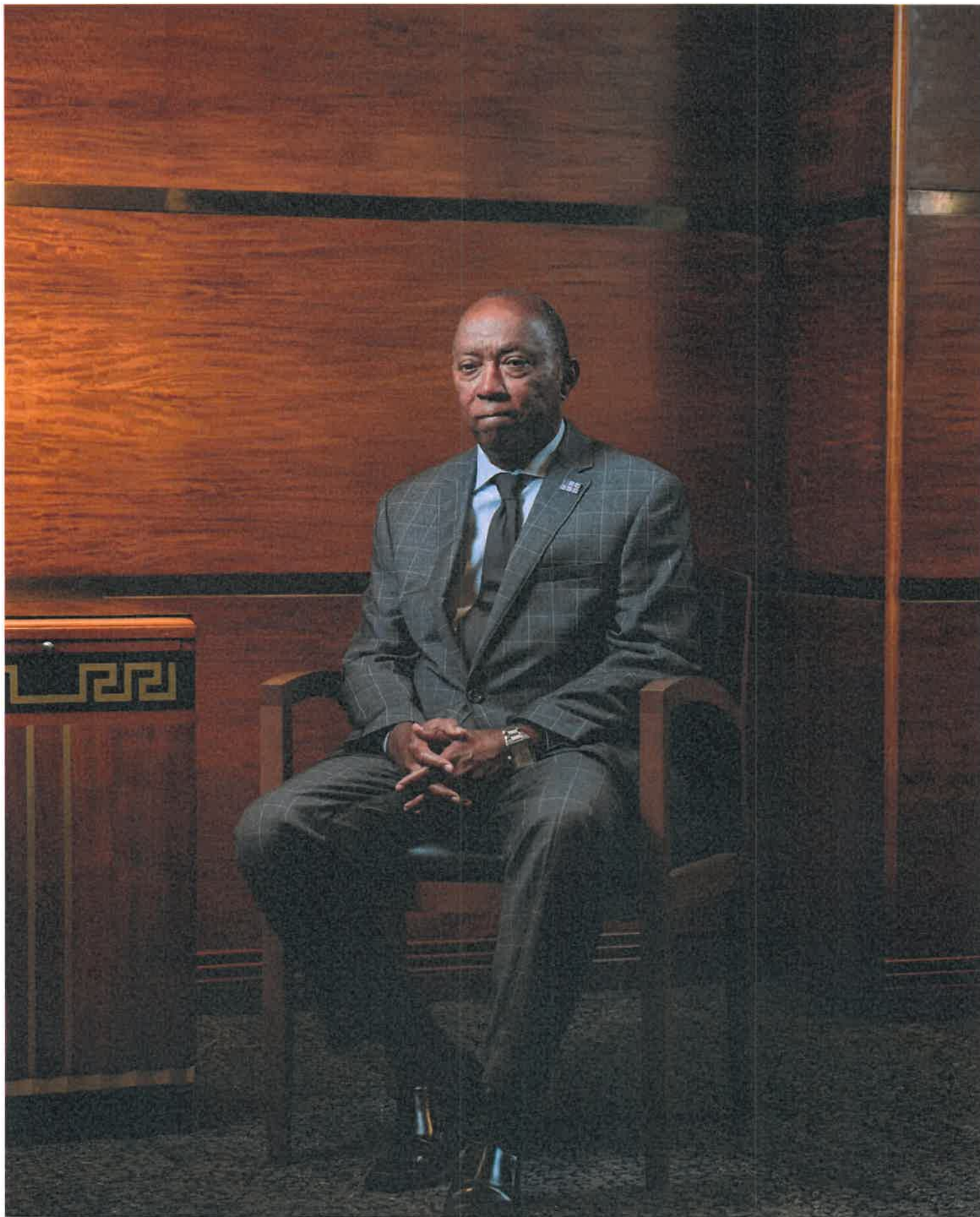
Houston has gotten this far by teaming with county agencies and persuading scores of local service providers, corporations and charitable nonprofits — organizations that often bicker and compete with one another — to row in unison. Together, they've gone all in on "housing first," a practice, supported by decades of research, that moves the most vulnerable people straight from the streets into apartments, not into shelters, and without first requiring them to wean themselves off drugs or complete a 12-step program or find God or a job.

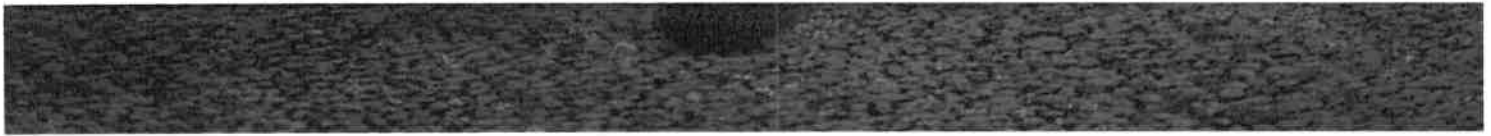
There are addiction recovery and religious conversion programs that succeed in getting people off the street. But housing first involves a different logic: When you're drowning, it doesn't help if your rescuer insists you learn to swim before returning you to shore. You can address your issues once you're on land. Or not. Either way, you join the wider population of people battling demons behind closed doors.

"Before I leave office, I want Houston to be the first big city to end chronic homelessness," Sylvester Turner told me. In late January, Mr. Turner, who is serving his final term as mayor, joined Harris County leaders in unveiling a \$100 million plan that would use a mix of federal, state, county and city funds to cut the local homeless count in half again by 2025.

Mr. Turner chose his words with care, and it's important to parse his phrasing. "Chronic homelessness" is a term of art. It refers to those people, like many in the Houston encampment, who have been living on the streets for more than a year or who have been homeless repeatedly, and who have a mental or physical disability. Nationwide, most of those who experience homelessness do not fall into that

narrow category. They are homeless for six weeks or fewer; 40 percent have a job. For them, homelessness is an agonizing but temporary condition that they manage to resolve, maybe by doubling up with relatives or friends.





Mayor Sylvester Turner says he wants Houston to be the first big city to “end chronic homelessness.” Christopher Lee for The New York Times

There are at the same time many thousands of mothers and children, as well as couch-surfing teenagers and young adults who are ill-housed and at risk. These people are also poor and desperate. Finding a place to sleep may be a daily struggle for them. They might be one broken transmission or emergency room visit away from the streets. They're in the pipeline to homelessness. But they are not homeless according to the bureaucratic definition. They are not sleeping on a sidewalk or in their cars or in shelters. Houston can offer these people a hand, but Mr. Turner is not promising to end the precariousness of their lives.

“We are not here to solve poverty. We aren't here to fix the affordable housing problem” is how Ms. Rausch puts it, adding, “Think of the homeless system in America as an emergency room for a triaged slice of poverty. What Houston has achieved is to get itself far enough along in addressing the challenge that we can *hope to begin* to think about the pipeline to homelessness.”

Encampments like the one in the underpass lay bare decades of calamitous decisions by planners, politicians and health and housing authorities. One in every 14 Americans experiences homelessness at some point, a population that is disproportionately Black. Eradicating homelessness would involve tackling systemic racism, reconstituting the nation's mental health, family support and substance abuse systems, raising wages, expanding the federal housing voucher program and building millions more subsidized homes.

The goal in Houston and among other cities attacking the problem is different: to make homelessness only “rare and brief,” to cite Rosanne Haggerty, the housing advocate. Five states — California, New York, Florida, Washington and Texas — now account for 57 percent of the people experiencing homelessness. Not coincidentally, it is worst in those big cities where affordable housing is in short supply, the so-called NIMBYs are powerful, and the yawning gap between median incomes and the cost of housing keeps growing. Houston fits that description. The scale of its woes does not approach what is happening in San Francisco, New York or Los Angeles. But the progress it has made in housing people is instructive and replicable. It constitutes a fragile, compelling success.

By midafternoon on that July day, Ms. Rausch's team had transferred those living in the encampment to their new residences. Among the people relocated was a shy, 39-year-old woman named Terri Harris. Ms. Harris had leaped at the prospect of an apartment when outreach workers approached her in the camp. She was tired of living on the streets, but, above all, she was desperate to reunite with her three-year-old daughter, Blesit, whom she had had to leave with her sister.

Two outreach workers packed Ms. Harris into a white van, along with a Hefty trash bag stuffed with household supplies and a Bible. Ms. Harris looked nervous but smiled as the van drove off.

At the end of the ride was a one-bedroom apartment.

“We Started Talking to Each Other”



The now empty site of a homeless encampment near downtown Houston. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

Half a century ago, America invented modern homelessness.

The stage was set with the shuttering of psychiatric hospitals in the wake of abuse scandals and the introduction of new psychotropic medications. Then cities started offering tax incentives to owners of flop houses, or single-room-occupancy hotels, to convert their properties into market-rate rentals, condos and co-ops. In New York City alone, more than 100,000 S.R.O. units that had housed substance abusers, elderly singles, former inmates and the mentally ill were lost.

During the 1980s, back-to-back recessions, combined with the Reagan administration's severe federal cutbacks targeting low-income housing and poverty assistance programs, forced more and more Americans — including large numbers of families — into homelessness. At the same time, well-paid manufacturing jobs moved overseas, and steelworkers had to start pushing brooms at McDonald's. An oil crisis drove up fuel prices, which bumped up rents, as did a new generation of gentrifiers discovering the architectural pleasures of historic neighborhoods.

On top of all that, Reagan-era tax reforms encouraged the construction of high-end, single-family homes but not of affordable multifamily rentals. There were 515,000 multifamily homes built in America in 1985, but just 140,000 built in 1991. As people began competing for fewer and fewer apartments, the affordable housing market turned into a game of musical chairs played by low-income Americans. Someone always lost.

A decade ago, Houston had one of the highest per capita homeless counts in the country. Its homeless response system was in shambles. The city was squandering millions of public dollars and police officers' time by jailing homeless Houstonians for intoxication. Residents living on the streets, under bridges and along the bayous were using ambulances to get basic medical care because they had no other way to do so.

And, as in other cities, dozens of local aid organizations, public and private, were operating in silos — competing for federal funds, duplicating services, not sharing information or goals, housing precious few people.

Jessica Preheim, the vice president for strategic planning at Houston's Coalition for the Homeless and one of Ms. Rausch's colleagues, remembers that every five or six years the Houston Housing Authority would announce a lottery for anyone hoping to get on the waiting list for federal housing vouchers. As Ms. Preheim recalls, if you wanted to enter the lottery, you needed first to hear the announcement, then submit an application in writing within a few days, before the lottery closed. If, by some miracle, your name were drawn, you would receive notification by snail mail, which, of course, required a street address.

It was a recipe for *not* housing homeless people.

Thao Costis, who runs a homeless service provider in Houston called SEARCH, said that back then her organization, like many in the city, was trying to do everything: outreach, case management, child services, employment training, paying rent to landlords to house clients. "SEARCH was \$1 million in the hole," Ms. Costis remembers, "and the people who most needed help weren't getting it."



Outreach workers for SEARCH — one of the many organizations that make up Houston's homelessness services — interview people living in a tent encampment. Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Ana Rausch, left, and Jessica Preheim help run the Coalition for the Homeless, the lead agency in Houston's homelessness response network. Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Thao Costis, left, and staff members at SEARCH. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

What started to bring about change was the passage in 2009 of the Homeless Act, which stipulated that, in order to receive federal dollars, cities had to adopt a “housing first” policy and, crucially, that homeless organizations had to work together in “continuum of care” under a single lead agency, coordinating their programs and sharing data. The federal government had recommended these continuums of care since 1994, but not until the Homeless Act was funding tied to specific metrics of effectiveness.

With the new regulations set to take effect in 2012, the Obama administration’s Department of Housing and Urban Development offered money and expertise to 10 cities where homelessness was a particular problem. Houston was among them.

Annisette Parker was Houston’s mayor at the time. I went to see her earlier this year. She lives with her wife, Kathy Hubbard, in a three-story gabled house built in 1904 on a pretty, tree-lined street in the Montrose neighborhood. Hanging in Ms. Parker’s foyer are framed photographs of the three daughters she and Ms. Hubbard adopted out of foster care, as well as of a teenage boy, now a man in his mid-40s — “a runaway from grandparents who tried to force the ‘gay’ out of him,” Ms. Parker says — who was living on the streets when they took him in.

Ms. Parker is the opposite of a slick politician: blunt, wonky, unassuming. A software analyst in the oil and gas industry for 20 years, she became city controller, managing Houston’s money, before being elected America’s first openly lesbian, big-city mayor in 2009.





"The bottom line is that nearly everybody in Houston involved in homelessness got together around what works," says Annise Parker, the city's former mayor. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

She won with bipartisan support as a Democrat on a centrist platform of fiscal responsibility. “Through our son, I had an up close and personal look at what life was like for somebody on the streets who was treated as disposable,” Ms. Parker told me. “Different organizations were all working in their own lanes, according to their own rules and procedures, doing what they wanted to do. There might be 100 open shelter beds on a given night designated for mothers with kids, but we didn’t have mothers with kids who needed beds.”

The White House offered an expert on homeless aid, Mandy Chapman-Semple, to help Ms. Parker herd the cats. They invited dozens of the city’s homeless-service providers to a meeting. “We started talking to each other” is how Ms. Preheim remembers that moment. “Sometimes it is as simple as that.”

The continuum was given a name, The Way Home, and the nonprofit Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County was appointed its lead agency. Some food banks and religious and other service providers that made prayer or sobriety conditions for housing did not join. But more than 100 local and regional organizations eventually signed on.

Houston started collecting real-time data, as opposed to relying solely on a once-a-year census. At first, the goal was to house 100 homeless veterans in 100 days, and after that was achieved, 300 more in another 100 days. “Then we thought, if we can do that, we can do something really big,” Ms. Parker told me.

It may seem surprising that, of all cities, Houston — built on a go-it-alone oil business culture — decided to tackle homelessness by, in effect, collectivizing its homeless relief system. Houston is a business-friendly city in a purple county in a red state, with more than its share of neighborhood housing covenants. But Houstonians will tell anyone willing to listen that they are nothing if not pragmatic.

The Houston Housing Authority joined the continuum. It agreed that 250 homeless clients a year could jump to the top of the waiting list for vouchers. Since that change, thousands have received vouchers and been housed.



The Beacon, a nonprofit that joined Houston’s “continuum” of homelessness services, provides hot meals, showers, legal aid and even a laundry service. Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Christopher Lee for The New York Times



At the Beacon, Joshua Davis, right, interviews Michael Mack to assess whether he is eligible for subsidized housing. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

SEARCH also joined. Coordination meant that Ms. Costis' group could focus on case management, leaving job training, child care and other services to fellow continuum members. That, in turn, allowed it to avoid financial collapse and to hire more case managers, a critical need.

"People were suddenly being housed with lightning speed," Ms. Costis recalled. "It was a phenomenal difference."

It helped, Ms. Parker says, "that back then we still had slack in our housing market and reasonably priced land. It also helped that we created a center for sobriety, stopped arresting 20,000 people a year for public intoxication and started handing out taxi vouchers to homeless people so they wouldn't use ambulances as personal taxis. All that saved us a fortune and made sense. But the bottom line is that nearly everybody in Houston involved in homelessness got together around what works. That's our secret sauce."

I struggled with this explanation. Housing first is not a new idea, after all. Other cities receive federal funds and have continuums of care. They don't achieve the same results.

"You can meet the letter of the law without embracing its true intent" is how Ms. Chapman-Semple put it to me. San Diego, for example, another of the 10 cities targeted by the Obama administration, created a continuum; but unlike Houston, which cut its homeless count by nearly two-thirds, San Diego was able to reduce the number by only 19 percent, a 2020 city audit concluded, because of a piecemeal approach to housing first and "ineffective" strategic planning.

Atlanta, too, was adrift until neighboring counties dropped out of a joint continuum and the city set up its own, modeling its approach on Houston's. Atlanta has since cut its homeless numbers by 40 percent and gained increasing corporate support — a vital source of additional funding. "When you get the public sector aligned, it becomes much easier to go to the private sector and say, 'Join us,'" Cathryn Vassell, who runs Atlanta's continuum, told me.

Getting businesses squarely behind solutions to homelessness, beyond their usual token contributions, is clearly a challenge in other places. In 2020, city councilors in Seattle approved a tax on businesses to support homeless housing. But the councilors rescinded the tax less than a month later in the face of opposition from big employers, including Amazon, which temporarily halted construction of a downtown tower in protest. Corporate leaders explained that they didn't trust the city to spend the money effectively. As a consequence of Houston's more united front, city officials were able to channel private money and federal emergency relief dollars in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, in 2017, to help supercharge the housing of unhoused Houstonians. And now Covid money, which other cities have spent on temporary shelters and hotel rooms, is paying the rent for thousands of apartments for the continuum's homeless clients.

A Reprieve, and the Clock Starts Ticking



Terri Harris's daughter, Blesit, plays in her new home. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

The apartment to which outreach workers drove Terri Harris from the underpass in July was in a low-rise, garden-style development from the 1980s. Brenda Salinas, a case manager from a service provider called Baker Ripley, helped Ms. Harris sign a lease in the front office and walked her to a ground-floor one-bedroom with a red front door. Ms. Salinas then captured a video of Ms. Harris, in flip-flops and a blue tank top, taking a couple of deep breaths, rising excitedly onto her tiptoes and turning the key.

Just a week earlier, the outreach team had found Ms. Harris in her tent under the highway. Now, as if by magic, here she was, shellshocked after five years on the streets. Opening the apartment's door revealed an empty, white-walled living room with a tidy galley kitchen, which the outreach workers began to stock with basic supplies. The coalition would send furniture and other household items in a few days. Ms. Harris pulled open one kitchen drawer, then another. Her expression recalled Tom Hanks's character in "Cast Away," when he's finally back home, staring with disbelief at the simple sight of ice in a glass. The walk-in closet in the bedroom was bigger and nicer than any place Ms. Harris had lived with her daughter, Blesit. Ms. Harris hugged the caseworkers. Then she collapsed onto the carpet and wept.

She was lucky. The vast majority of the 50,000 people in the Houston area who sought some type of homelessness service in 2021 did not qualify for an apartment. Most were “diverted”: they received rental assistance, or were given help signing up for food stamps or Social Security benefits. Part of the job of the continuum is to identify and assess people according to a federal “vulnerability index,” which uses a series of standard questions to determine who on the streets is most vulnerable. Meant to systematize a selection process historically rife with discrimination and random decision-making, the index has its own racial and gender biases, critics say. One study, for example, showed that while white and Black women have the same odds of experiencing homelessness because of trauma, white women are much more likely to report trauma and thus score higher on the index. Houston has cooked up a version that aspires to be more sensitive and tailored to conditions specific to the city.

Those who receive the highest scores on Houston’s index — the chronically homeless — become eligible for what is known as permanent supportive housing. “Supportive” means that, in addition to receiving housing, the person is given money for rent, utilities, bus fare and other necessities, and is assigned a case manager who helps with access to employment programs, psychiatric and substance abuse treatment.

That housing first gets people off the street is undisputed. Critics do question whether it does a better job than programs mandating substance-abuse treatment or other behavioral interventions at improving the long-term health of chronically homeless individuals. Some skeptics argue that, in a universe of limited resources like vouchers, prioritizing the most challenging cases can disadvantage housing-insecure families, those in substandard housing and others who need help. But these arguments miss the point of housing first, proponents respond.

“The homeless guy on your doorstep who spits on you when you leave your house and is always spouting from Revelations may be the least sympathetic character in the world, so you may not like the idea of paying to house him,” Ms. Parker, the former mayor, says. “But you can’t complain about him being on the street and also complain about getting him off it.”

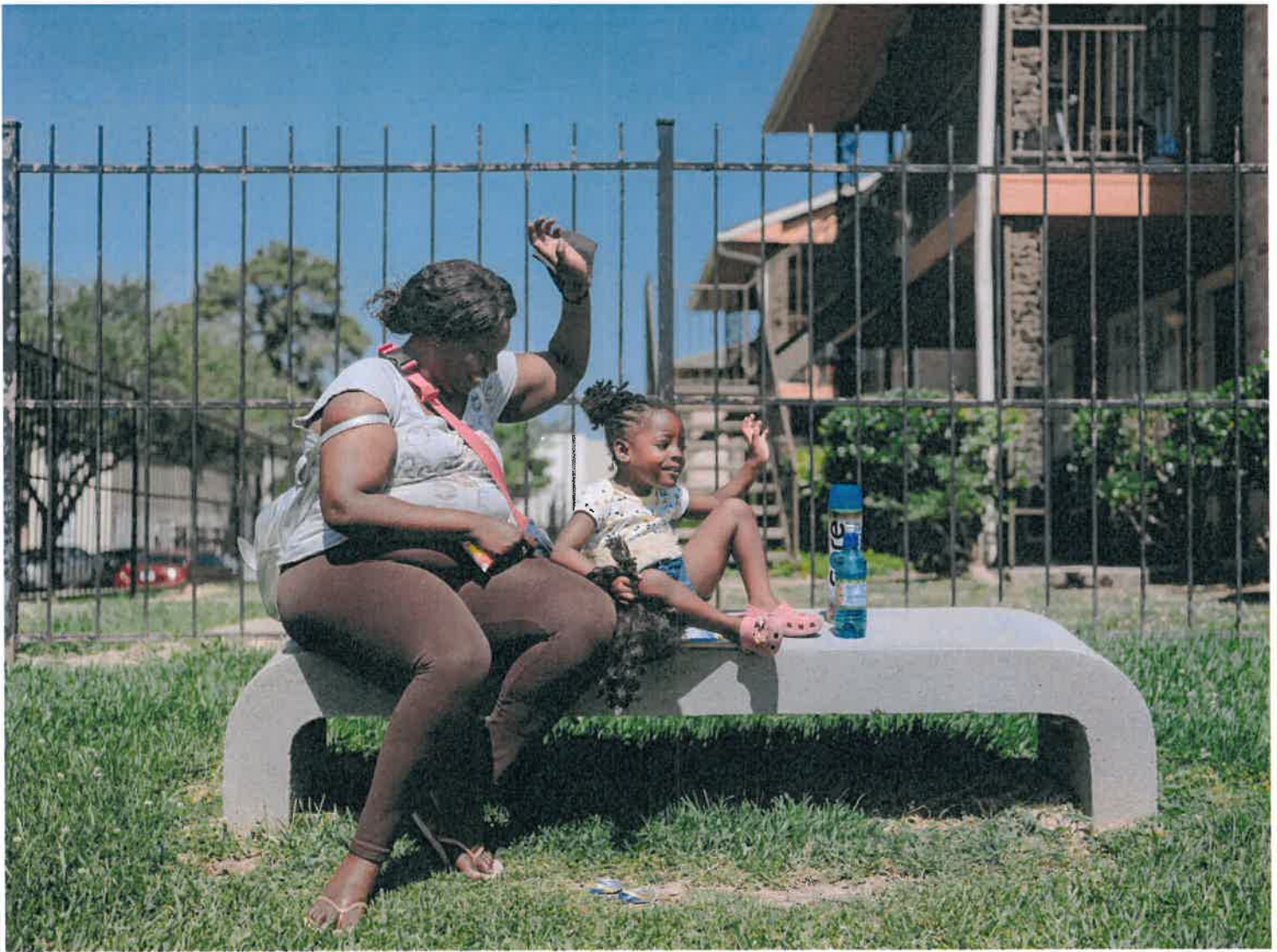
Economists disagree about how to measure the costs of housing first to taxpayers. Estimates point to significant savings — from \$4,800 to more than \$60,000 per year per person in supportive housing. But advocates contend that programs to reduce homelessness should not be measured by whether they save taxpayers money, particularly given that government subsidies are heavily tilted toward homeowners.



Ms. Harris received a lease for a one-bedroom in a low-rise complex. She did not score high enough on a “vulnerability index” to be eligible for permanent housing, but she did qualify for what is called rapid rehousing, which gave her one year of rent — one year of grace — to get back on her feet. Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Having a house allowed her to be reunited with her daughter, whom she had left with her sister while she lived on the streets. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

Because she didn't have a disability, Terri Harris didn't qualify for permanent supportive housing. But she did score high enough on Houston's version of the index for what was called rapid rehousing, which is what most people who qualify for housing in the city — 4,233 of them in 2021 — are offered. The continuum pays for an apartment leased in a client's name for a year and for help from a case manager. The client has that year to get on his or her feet and find either the means to pay the rent or some other place to live. It's a respite, a chance, not a guarantee. There are critics of rapid rehousing who contend it's just kicking the can down the road. In Houston, nearly three-quarters of those who have been rapidly rehoused remain housed afterward — a lot, albeit not everyone.

When I first encountered Ms. Harris, following the encampment's dismantling, she responded to questions only with yes or no answers. Six months later, I visited her again, in her apartment. It was a blustery morning. She curled up on a dark gray sofa that now occupied a corner of her living room. Blesit slept under a sheet on a mattress in the bedroom. With Ms. Salinas, her case manager, and another worker from Baker Ripley on hand, Ms. Harris seemed more at ease.

She told me that she was born in Decatur, Ill., and that her parents were drug addicts and alcoholics. At age 12, while her mother was visiting relatives in Texas, she was abused by her father and uncle. Her mother brought Terri to Houston.

There, a high school counselor helped her get therapy. She graduated and enrolled in a community college but had to quit to care for a wheelchair-bound relative and started spiraling toward "a whole new level of depression." Twice, she said, she tried to kill herself: "When I looked in the mirror," she told me, "I saw my father's face." Her tragedies multiplied. Her mother lost a job in a warehouse, and Ms. Harris's meager wage as a caretaker was all that sustained them. Unable to pay rent, the two were evicted. They moved into their car. Then the car broke down.

Eventually, Ms. Harris ended up on the streets, where a relationship left her pregnant. After Blesit was born, Ms. Harris and the baby lived in a tent until someone living in a house nearby threatened to call child services. That's when Ms. Harris left her daughter with her sister and found the encampment under the highway.

A manager in one of the nearby fast food restaurants gave Ms. Harris something to eat now and then. In search of a bed, she trekked a few times to Star of Hope, a first-come-first-served women's shelter on the other side of town. She was willing to take Bible lessons, as that shelter required, but there was never an open spot.

She had been welcomed in the new apartment complex, Ms. Harris told me. One neighbor offered her a ride to a grocery store. "But I have nothing to give her back, so I don't like to ask for help," Ms. Harris said. She had not told anyone she had been homeless. "My neighbors are upscale people. I want them to see me like a regular person. People look at you with disgust when they think you're homeless."

It was January, and she was scraping by on \$443 a month in food stamps.

"They Didn't Want to Rent to Us Anymore"



Ana Rausch, a vice president of Houston's Coalition for the Homeless, sees her organization as part of an emergency room for "a triaged slice of poverty." Christopher Lee for The New York Times

Not far from Ana Rausch's house in a leafy, middle-class suburb northwest of downtown Houston, a community of people camped for years unnoticed. Then an AutoZone arrived and cleared away the brush that hid them. "Suddenly, my neighbors complained about homeless people moving in," Ms. Rausch recalled. "They talked about the 'dangerous tent people,' as if these people hadn't been living there quietly, and without trouble, all that time."

This is one reason Mayor Turner, who has gradually leaned into his predecessor's homeless agenda, has prioritized clearing encampments while also proclaiming his commitment to housing the unhoused. Perception shapes policy. Homelessness nationwide has been rising since 2016, mostly because of a few big, affordable-housing-starved, shelter-dependent coastal cities. Before then it had been declining, and the number of people experiencing homelessness across the country was still lower at last count, in 2020, than it was a decade earlier.

But decline is not what many people perceive, even in places like Houston. The grinding, day-to-day efforts to interview unhoused people, find them suitable apartments, help them get food stamps and bus fare, happen largely unnoticed, easily overshadowed by the sight of even one person sleeping on a sidewalk or beside a busy highway. And sentiments have changed. "Housing the homeless used to be something everybody agreed on," Ms. Chapman-Semple says. "But there's something new in America — an intolerance, a cultural shift."

That shift is partly fueled by violence like the killings this year of Christina Yuna Lee in her apartment in Manhattan's Chinatown and of Michelle Alyssa Go, who was shoved from a Times Square subway platform into an oncoming train. In each case, the police arrested a homeless man with a history of mental illness. Ms. Rausch understands why people fear someone who appears mentally ill or out of control. She was raised by a single mother who struggled to pay the bills, and she sometimes wrestles with what is owed to, say, an unhoused man who rejects a spot in one of Houston's new single-room-occupancy projects because he says he wants to hold out for a one-bedroom.

"There was a time my mom struggled to buy food," she recalls. "Some of the places where my mother and I lived are where we now place homeless clients. "

The Houston that Ms. Rausch grew up in has changed. A once-abundant inventory of affordable housing has shrunk drastically. New construction focuses overwhelmingly on the top of the market. As elsewhere, giant investment firms like Blackstone have been gobbling up housing stock, pricing out middle-class and lower-income residents. Making matters harder, eviction filings in Harris County are now soaring: they're higher than they were before the pandemic.

"Meanwhile, housing costs are rising faster than incomes," points out Bill Fulton, the director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research, a think tank in the city, "And, as a result, a large majority of Houstonians have been shut out of homeownership and become renters, half of them rent-burdened, meaning they pay more than a third, and often more than half, of their income in rent."

Jeremy Sanders, a caseworker whose job is to help homeless people, told me that he has struggled to stay housed. Married, with two children, Mr. Sanders earns \$43,000 a year. "For a while, when my wife wasn't working, I needed grace from our landlord," he said. "It was tough coming to work every day, smiling with my colleagues and the clients, because I really wasn't sure whether we would have a place to live next month." As it happened, Mr. Sanders's wife found a job the day before I met him. "It was a good thing," he said, "because we had spent our last savings."

Mr. Fulton says that this compression at the lower end of the housing market means that rent-burdened Houstonians — people like Mr. Sanders — are competing with "the homeless for a shrinking stock of deteriorating apartments that are charging increasingly higher rents." Housing vouchers from the federal government barely make a dent in the problem. In 2010, some 220,000 people in Houston qualified for 20,000 vouchers. Today, 600,000 people meet the requirements for just 40,000 vouchers.



In Houston, as in other cities, rents are rising fast. Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Mike Nichols, left, the president of the Coalition for the Homeless, and Lance Gilliam, the group's chairman, are trying to persuade landlords to continue renting to tenants who lived in a shelter or on the street. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

"For most of my life, Houston was a place where anybody could find an affordable home if they were willing to drive far enough from downtown," says Lance Gilliam, the chairman of the Coalition for the Homeless. "Partly, we've become victims of our own success. Because the coalition was filling these sorts of places with tenants, they became more attractive to investors," Mr. Gilliam said. "Some started saying they didn't want to rent to us anymore."

I met with a landlord whose buildings house some 200 formerly homeless clients of the continuum. She asked to remain anonymous so as not to stigmatize her company's properties in the minds of other tenants or potential renters. She explained the calculus that landlords now make: During the last year, she said occupancy rates in the city reached 95 percent, and rents rose by 17 percent. Government rental vouchers guarantee monthly payments, but there is often more money to be made — and less red tape — when renting to unsubsidized tenants.

I learned this spring that 200 formerly homeless clients were told they might have to move from a complex run by a different landlord. The complex was sold last year, and the new owners were reconsidering the relationship with the continuum. The same was happening at six other properties in the area.

In response, Marc Eichenbaum, the mayor's special assistant for homeless initiatives, started holding weekly meetings with the continuum and with local housing authorities and county commissioners. They pondered converting derelict motel rooms into apartments as well as building new, subsidized properties, so that the continuum would not always be beholden to private landlords. But doing those things would take years.

To address the immediate problem, Mr. Eichenbaum reached out to landlords and, as he put it, "let them know that finding one-bedrooms for homeless Houstonians was a top priority for Mayor Turner." Then "we organized a handoff to Mike Nichols and his team at the coalition to close the deal."

Mike Nichols is the president of the Coalition for the Homeless. A former corporate executive who served two terms as a Democrat in Georgia's House of Representatives, Mr. Nichols picked up the story: "I asked the landlords, 'What do you need?'" Landlords, he said, complained about the maze of agencies they had to navigate when there was a problem with a tenant. "Now we're meeting with the owners of properties about providing better service and moving out the few troublesome residents."

Instead of losing apartments this year, Mr. Eichenbaum told me, "we're hopeful we may gain up to 1,000 more than we had." It's not nearly enough to solve the city's one-bedroom shortage but enough to stanch the bleeding and inch forward.

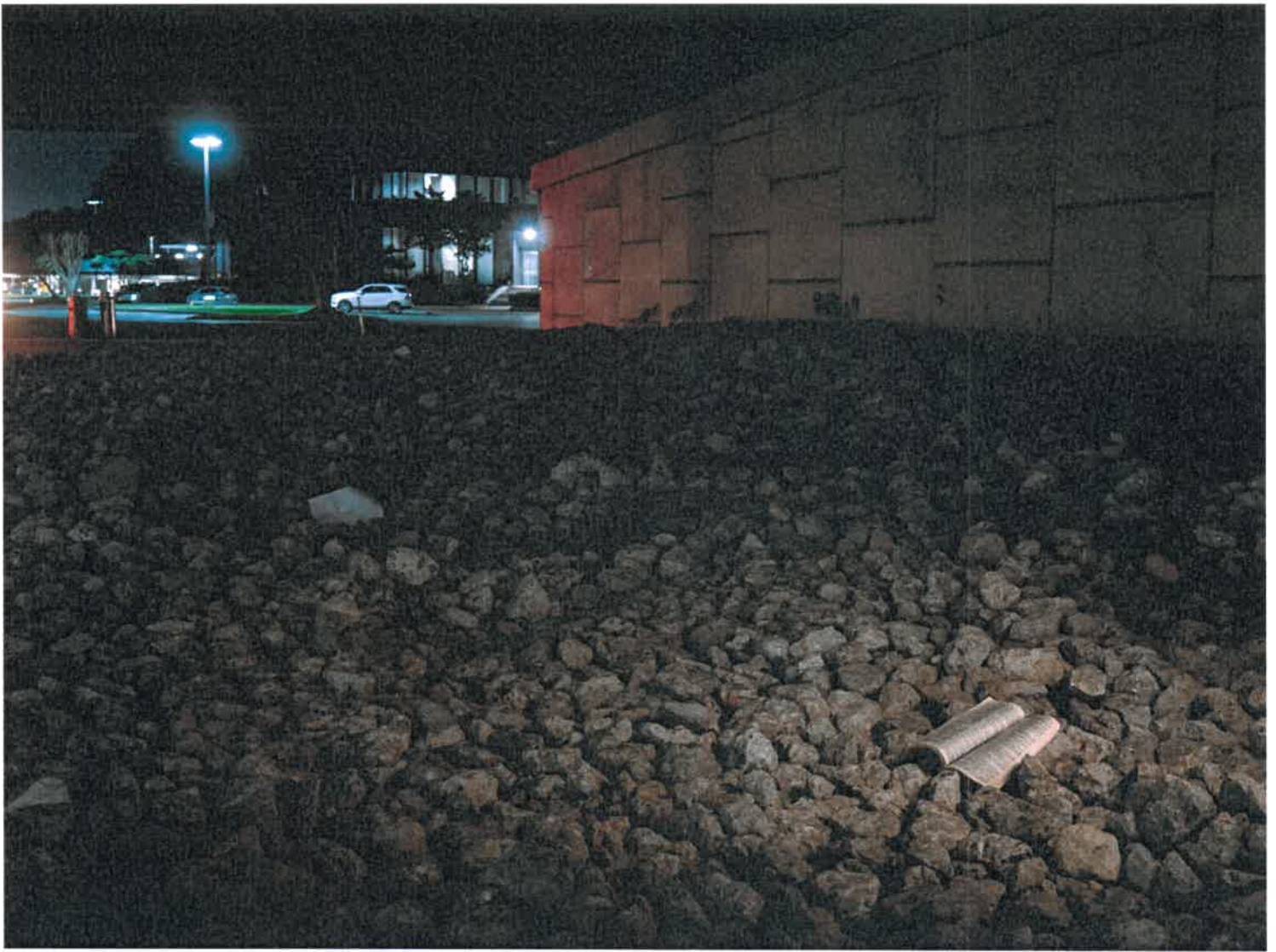
This was Houston's homelessness story in a nutshell, I realized. "Housing people is a slow, extremely complicated, incremental process that requires all hands on deck, all the time, if you don't want to settle for the status quo, much less go backward," Mr. Eichenbaum said. "Everyone has to come together around the table."

Nearly a year after watching people being moved out of the encampment in the underpass, that was still the city's message and I still had a lot of questions. I wondered about the uncounted couch-surfing families and youth; about the underpaid, overtaxed caseworkers who cannot provide enough help; about the landlords refusing to house tenants with vouchers, and people like Ms. Harris and her daughter, Blesit, judged not quite desperate enough for more permanent housing.

But mostly I wondered what individuals would extract from Houston's example. Homelessness is a calamity millions reckon with each day — a calamity provoking a mix of rage, fear and powerlessness in the housed and unhoused alike. For me, the big reveal after a year was not that Houston had solved the problem. It hasn't. There is no one-time fix to homelessness.

The reveal was something different. It was that in broken America it's still possible for adversaries to share facts and come together around something contentious and difficult. Public and private, county and city, businesses and nonprofits, conservatives and liberals, the housed and unhoused: In Houston, enough of them have agreed on a goal that seems worth striving for. Working in concert, they have made genuine progress in housing previously unhoused people. And, so far, the benefits of collaboration have fended off the usual forces of entropy. That was an eye-opener and a sign of hope.

Two Months to Come Up With \$886 for Rent



The underpass where Terri Harris once lived. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

The other day, I talked to Ms. Harris on the phone. After several months, she had finally come up with the \$12 to replace her Texas identification card that had been stolen while she was living on the streets, as well as a Social Security card. With her new IDs, she could apply for jobs. A job listed at a Whataburger paid \$9.53 an hour. But after dropping off Blesit with her sister and traveling across town, she was told by the restaurant manager that the position had been filled. A human resources firm was offering to help her with child care, but Ms. Harris hadn't gotten around to arranging it, she told me, because it required she register online and only recently had she gotten access to a computer. Blesit's father had found work at a Family Dollar across town, and, when he could, he took the bus to lend Ms. Harris a hand. Ms. Harris is now waiting to hear back about a job as a janitor.

She can't sleep some nights out of fear of losing the apartment. "It's the first time I have had my own place," she said. "My neighbors watch out for me. I've learned how to save money, how to be an adult — how to be a mother. I want to finish college and watch my baby go to school and graduate." But she has no housing voucher, and her lease will expire at the end of July unless she can come up with the \$886 a month the continuum now pays in rent.





"It's the first time I've had my own place," said Ms. Harris. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

Anticipating that Ms. Harris may need to move, Ms. Salinas has reached out to a program called Shelters to Shutters, which provides an apartment and job training in return for work.

Ms. Harris is housed. But she isn't home yet.

What do you think of Houston's approach?

Houston has been held up as a model among big cities trying to reduce homelessness. How do you think it's doing?

What lessons do you take away from this story? *

0 words

Do you think Houston's approach to addressing homelessness is making the issue better or worse?

- ☐ Much worse
- ☐ Somewhat worse
- ☐ Staying the same
- ☐ Somewhat better
- ☐ Much better

Tell us why you answered that way.

0 words

Tell us whether your community's approach is better or worse than Houston's. Why or why not?

0 words

Who do you think can make the biggest difference in a community's effort to solve homelessness or housing insecurity?

0 words

Do you have a connection to the issue of homelessness or housing insecurity?

- ☐ I have experienced homelessness or someone close to me has experienced it
- ☐ I have professional or volunteer experience
- ☐ I have both experienced homelessness and work in the field
- ☐ Something else
- ☐ No connection

What would you like to tell us about your experience?

Please share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with.

