

An aerial photograph of a city skyline at dusk. The sky is filled with orange and yellow clouds from the setting sun. The city is illuminated with lights from its buildings and streets. A large river flows through the city, with several bridges crossing it. The foreground shows a mix of urban development and green spaces.

# Homelessness: Challenges and Promising Practices

Austin, Texas, is an incubator for new approaches to this complex issue.

**Homelessness is a huge challenge for cities. In 2018, homelessness in the U.S. increased for the second year after declining the previous six years.<sup>1</sup>**

Homelessness is a complex issue that falls outside of a city's core traditional services. It's also managed largely through a relatively loose network of private providers and public health agencies. Due to this and other reasons, city leaders struggle to solve this issue.

Leaders in Austin, Texas, are frequently recognized for their dedication to systems change and innovative strategies to help their city's homeless population. To share ideas and perspectives about reducing homelessness in Austin and throughout the nation, *Governing* recently convened a roundtable of experts, including Austin city leaders, representatives from the Texas governor's office and leaders from various organizations that serve the homeless. This paper highlights the issues raised during their discussions.

## **Strategies for Tackling the Growing Homelessness Epidemic**

The number of homeless individuals is growing, even though many jurisdictions dedicate more resources to the issue each year. For example, the number of homeless individuals in Los Angeles County rose for the third time in four years, despite two voter-approved tax hikes and a \$619 million effort in 2018 to tackle the problem through social services and new housing.<sup>2</sup> The June 2019 count released by the Los Angeles County Homeless Services Authority showed there are nearly 60,000 homeless people in the county on any given night.

At the same time, there are more requests from citizens to address this important issue, challenging city leaders to do more.

Austin spends between \$30 million and \$35 million of its \$4.1 billion annual budget on homeless services each year, including health, housing and court programs.<sup>3</sup> The city has also worked hard to foster collaboration among nonprofits,



service providers and landlords. As a result, Austin is viewed as an incubator for innovative programs for the homeless, and has received recognition and/or funding from organizations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Some highlights of Austin's work around homelessness include:

- In 2018, voters approved \$250 million in bonds to develop more affordable housing. The nonprofit Community First! Village is expanding its East Austin project, which already houses more than 200 once-chronically homeless people in tiny houses, RVs and canvas-sided cottages. The Downtown Austin Alliance has promised another \$2 million to help grow the program.
- The city's mental health authority, Integral Care, is building an apartment complex that will house about 50 homeless people who will also receive a variety of services designed to keep them stable.
- The Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO) launched an initiative to house and provide services for up to 250 homeless people in Travis County using a new funding model where investors pay upfront costs and are reimbursed by local governments if the project's goals are met.
- Lifeworks, which serves at-risk youth, is leading a targeted effort to end local youth homelessness with a \$5 million grant from HUD.

- Austin recently approved a \$1.2 billion expansion of the convention center in exchange for hoteliers agreeing to increase hotel taxes. The tax is expected to raise \$4 million to \$8 million a year for homeless assistance.

But as leaders in Austin and many other cities have learned, homelessness isn't easily solved. Despite their hard work, Austin's annual 2019 Point in Time Count, which tracks people living on the streets and in shelters, showed homelessness in Austin rose five percent from 2018. Since 2015, it has increased by 23 percent.<sup>4</sup>

### Challenges and Examples of Innovation

Some of the thorny issues roundtable participants discussed and the innovative ways cities are working to address them include:

- **Funding.** A large portion of funding to help the homeless comes from the federal government and goes directly to local agencies that coordinate homeless financing and services. This approach results in siloed efforts. Some cities are establishing new offices to aggregate funding from multiple sources so they can create more innovative and coordinated approaches. For example, the city of Santa Clara, Calif., recently created an Office of Supportive Housing focused on increasing the supply of affordable housing for low-income or special needs households.
- **Housing.** A growing shortage of affordable rental housing nationwide has contributed to the homeless epidemic. To mitigate this problem, several cities have implemented Housing First strategies wherein homeless individuals are offered permanent, affordable housing as well as connections



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to community-based supports to prevent them from returning to homelessness. Other strategies focus on keeping people in their homes, such as programs that enlist city employees to work with property managers to identify and assist families at risk of eviction. Other programs help ensure tenants have legal representation in eviction cases, which is proven to reduce the rates of eviction.

- **Data Sharing/Collaboration.** Homeless individuals often interact with numerous organizations within a city, but regulations such as HIPAA, as well as a lack of integration between IT systems, can prevent those organizations from sharing data. For example, Austin currently uses 11 disparate systems to collect data on its homeless population.

“It’s critically important that we get systems in place to integrate all this data,” said one participant. “We have to work smarter.”

Data can also provide evidence of what’s working and what’s not so jurisdictions can make informed investments.

- **Healthcare.** Maintaining good health while living on the streets is difficult. Typhus, tuberculosis and hepatitis are widespread in some areas with large homeless populations. Homeless individuals often have complex health issues that can amplify each other. As a result, some resort to self-medicating, which creates new challenges around substance abuse. Mental health can also be a challenge. But the structure and inflexibility of the existing healthcare system makes it difficult for homeless individuals to access the care they need. Because physical and mental health often affect each other, an integrated model can be more effective. Austin is currently piloting a mobile healthcare unit that provides both physical and mental healthcare to assist homeless individuals. The mobile unit includes a

multidisciplinary team staffed by a doctor, a psychiatrist, a chemical dependency counselor and others.

- **Homeless Youth.** One in 30 adolescents experience homelessness in the U.S., and that rate is even higher for youth who identify as LGBTQ and youth of color.<sup>5</sup> In addition, after reaching the age of 18, 20 percent of children in foster care will instantly become homeless.<sup>6</sup> The 100-Day Challenge is an initiative led by A Way Home America and the Rapid Results Institute to help communities develop and implement a coordinated approach to connect youth to safe and stable housing. Thirty-two communities thus far, including Austin, have participated in 100-Day Challenges. In Austin, the effort helped house 62 homeless youth in 2017.
- **Education.** Arming individuals with the education and skills they need to secure a job is “the most tried and true way out of homelessness,” according to one participant. That means identifying at-risk students (without violating HIPAA or FERPA laws) and developing strategies to keep them in school. Waco, Texas, is approaching this issue by providing at-risk young people a safe space called The Cove. Students can come to The Cove to access showers, mental healthcare, case management, food, washers/dryers, and tutoring services and educational programming through community partners. City leaders hope this support will help students stay in school because they don’t have to worry as much about their basic needs.

### **The Endgame: Moving Toward Prevention and System Change**

Roundtable participants agreed solving homelessness won’t be easy, but identified key areas that can make an impact:

- **Focus on prevention.** Studies show homeless adolescents are more likely to become homeless adults. Moving



upstream toward prevention is critical. As one participant said, “housing homeless children changes their lives and ultimately changes the community.”

Participants suggested cities engage with juvenile justice, foster care systems and schools to prevent young people from experiencing homelessness.

- **Engage the medical community.** Participants agreed that engaging the medical community is a strategy with significant promise. That means working with the medical community to encourage medical staff to ask patients about housing as part of an overall health assessment. It also means connecting at-risk individuals to community resources.
- **Address housing challenges.** Homelessness at its most basic is about housing. As one roundtable participant put it, “We won’t see the outcomes we want unless we can connect homeless people to housing.” All efforts must therefore lead to creating more affordable places for people to live.
- **Leverage technology and data sharing.** Eliminating data silos can help city leaders see the big picture. City leaders must therefore think about systems change

and new ways to share data. Technology and data sharing also helps organizations see what’s working and allows them to communicate that information back to decision-makers.

Participants suggested cities focus on small, manageable projects and build from there. For example, the Texas Homeless Network is working with Amazon Web Services (AWS) to combine disparate systems that track homelessness data into a single data warehouse that facilitates data sharing among the city’s various organizations. And ECHO is working with AWS to develop a mobile application that will help it collect Point in Time Count data electronically rather than with paper forms.

- **Collaborate.** Cities can’t solve homelessness alone. Creating impactful solutions will require coordination among different systems, various levels of government and the private sector.

Most roundtable participants said they believe the homeless epidemic will continue to get worse before it begins to get better. But participants were also hopeful that innovative efforts underway in cities like Austin will ultimately help change the future of homelessness for the better.

#### Endnotes:

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3. Why Austin’s Homeless Problem Can’t Hide in the Shadows, June 6, 2019, <http://gatehousenews.com/austin-homeless-problem/>
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