

Insights from Research: Responding to the Crisis of Unsheltered Homelessness with Permanent Housing Solutions

2025 NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
ENDING HOMELESSNESS



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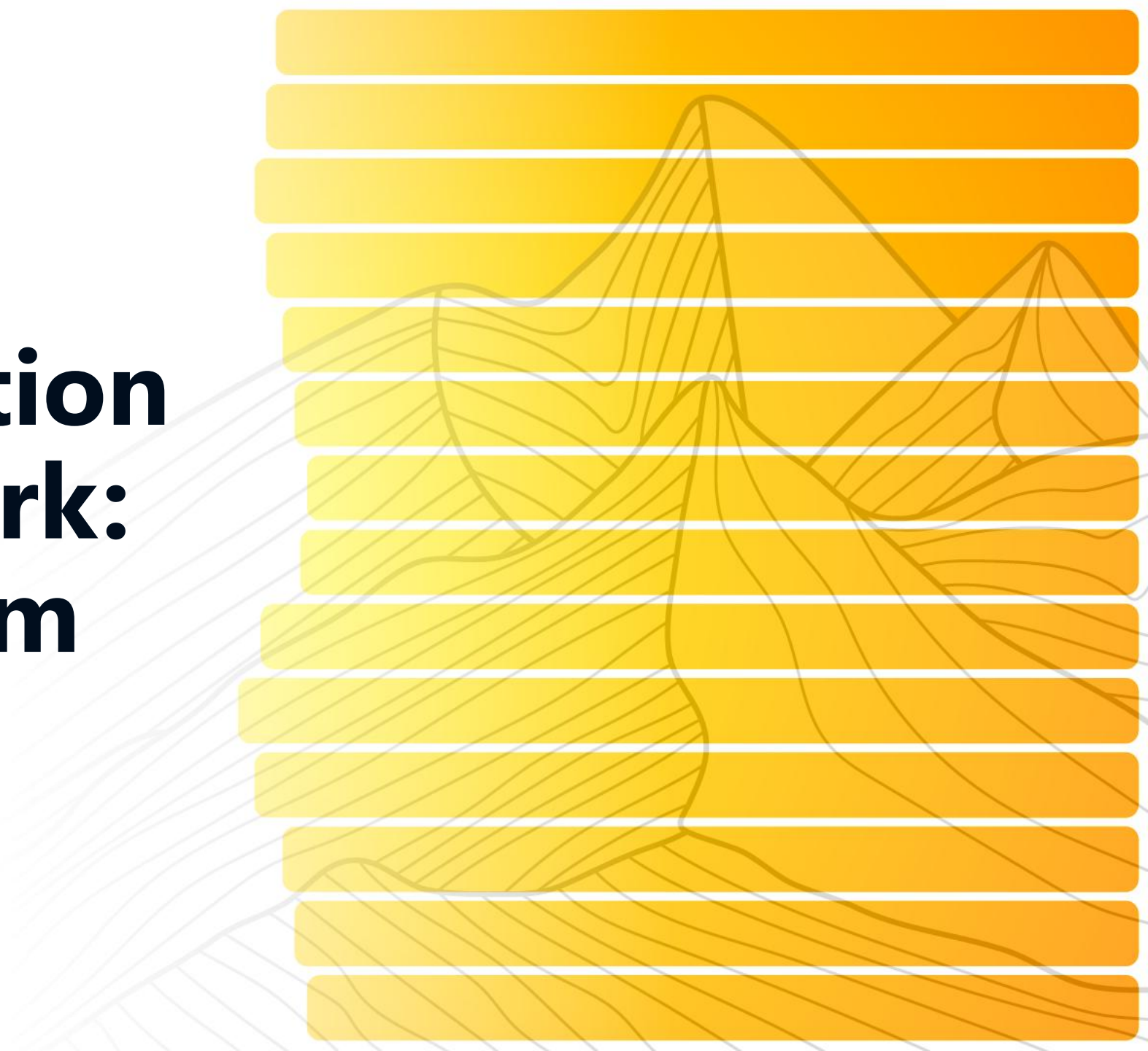
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Communities are grappling with how best to respond to growing unsheltered homelessness. In this session, attendees will learn from researchers about emerging evidence about short- and long-term strategies. Interventions discussed will cover the spectrum from street outreach to direct permanent housing connections, including those recently funded by HUD's Special NOFO to Address Rural & Unsheltered Homelessness.



Why Criminalization Doesn't Work: Insights from Research



Background

- Summer 2024: *Grants Pass v. Johnson* emboldened communities across the United States to effectively criminalize unsheltered homelessness.
- Leading up to *Grants Pass*, 57 social scientists submitted an amicus curiae brief against criminalization.
- We summarized their synthesis of nearly 100 studies...

NATIONAL

The Supreme Court says cities can punish people for sleeping in public places

UPDATED JUNE 28, 2024 · 11:15 AM ET ⓘ

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION



Jennifer Ludden



3-Minute Listen

+ PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



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Displacement & Property Seizures Prolong Homelessness

- Displacement disrupts connections with social service providers
- Property seizures make exiting homelessness more difficult.
 - ~50% of participants in a San Francisco study had lost property to city officials.
 - Lost property often includes items vital for accessing employment and housing.
- Displacement and property seizures contribute to job loss and missed work.



Criminalization is Costly

- Enforcement is expensive with limited results.
- Fines harm people and are not cost-effective.
 - The cost to issue a citation is often more than the citation amount itself.
 - Citations lead to increased debt, damaged credit, and even jail time.
 - In Seattle, debt from legal fines prolonged homelessness by almost two years.
- Housing and services can be cheaper.
 - A supportive housing program in Denver cost about \$12,000-\$15,500 per person per year and saved about \$6,900 in other public service costs.



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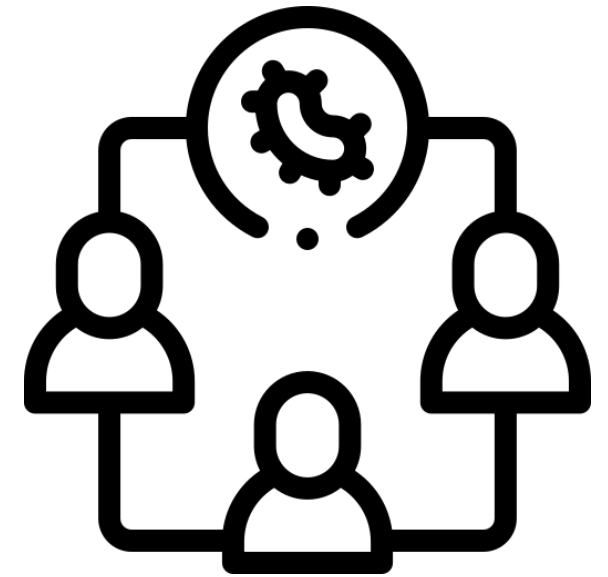
Criminalization Harms Safety

- Criminalization makes unsheltered homelessness more dangerous by:
 - disrupting protective ties;
 - pushing people into more marginal and hazardous environments;
 - discouraging people from accessing help.
- Criminalization does not advance public safety goals by:
 - making it harder to exit homelessness;
 - diverting law enforcement resources;
 - often failing to reduce crime.



Criminalization Harms Health

- Unsheltered homelessness contributes to worse health. Criminalization makes it worse by:
 - disrupting service and social ties;
 - confiscating belongings;
 - pushing people into hazardous environments away from medical and social services.
- Criminalization endangers public health by:
 - increasing the spread of infectious diseases;
 - burdening the medical system;
 - not reducing underlying public health concerns.



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Criminalization Does Not Solve Homelessness

- Anti-homeless laws have existed since the 1990s—they haven't reduced homelessness.
- Displacement doesn't address root causes.
 - In LA, social service workers were involved in encampment evictions only 15% of the time; 89%+ of encampment residents continued to experience homelessness post-eviction.
 - Encampment removals create an ongoing cycle of movement.
- Resulting jail time/a criminal record makes it harder to exit homelessness.

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Want more info?

Find our series of research briefs [here](#)

CRIMINALIZING HOMELESSNESS WORSENS THE CRISIS, RESEARCH SHOWS



National Alliance to
END HOMELESSNESS

In Partnership With



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In summer 2024, the Supreme Court's ruling in [City of Grants Pass v. Johnson](#) emboldened communities across the country to [consider or enact new measures](#) that make sleeping in public spaces a legally punishable offense, effectively criminalizing homelessness. However, criminalization only exacerbates the crisis, failing to address the root causes of homelessness and punishing individuals for circumstances beyond their control. This approach is not only harmful and counterproductive, but also deepens existing racial inequities, given the disproportionate impact of homelessness on Black people and other communities of color.

Leading up to the case, 57 social scientists who have previously published peer-reviewed research on homelessness came together to submit an [amicus curiae brief](#) against criminalization. This brief serves as an introduction to a comprehensive series that distills their extensive research, which highlights how criminalizing homelessness not only prolongs the issue but also squanders public resources and causes severe harm to individuals' health and well-being.

Advocates, policymakers, and everyday Americans are encouraged to draw upon this research to push back on local efforts to criminalize homelessness and inform effective and humane solutions.

Encampment Resolution Strategies & Experiences

Zion Alderette
Sara Shuman*

*(see last slide for full research team)



COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES
Southwest Institute
for Research on Women

Introduction



This work is driven by our team's desire to reduce unsheltered homelessness in AZ and beyond.

We are committed to:

- Community-engaged and community-driven work
- Action-oriented research & evaluation
- Providing timely feedback to our community partners
- Listening to suggestions and modifying plans accordingly

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Encampment Resolution Strategies

Encampments have increased

- Paired with a rise in homelessness
- Esp. in west coast cities

Encampments are associated with myths that reinforce stigma & reluctance to help

- Substance use does not *drive* encampments
- People are not “service-resistant” or uninterested in housing

Most research is about sweeps/forced removals, need for more information about other strategies

- Sweeps may increase overdoses, hospitalizations, deaths

Practices used to support and serve people &/or reduce and remove homeless encampments.

Goals of encampment resolution may prioritize safe and stable pathways to housing, the reduction of unsheltered homelessness, and/or the removal of encampments.

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Project Overview



1. What are current encampment resolution strategies in Arizona?



2. What are the perspectives and experiences of people living in encampments about services and resolution strategies?



3. What are the impacts of different strategies on housing+ outcomes?

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Phase 1: What is Happening?

Purpose: To understand what strategies are being used and their outcomes in three Arizona counties (2023-2024)

Status:

- Completed interviews with 14 community experts (CBOs, LE, gov.)
- Reviewed published materials about encampment strategies and outcomes



Phase 1: What is Happening?

37 strategies identified to address encampments and unsheltered homelessness in AZ.

Strategies include:

Outreach, connection to services, & case management	Housing Central Command; Prioritization/Tiered models	Providing education
Building trust, being honest, identifying strengths of encampments	Peer navigation, street outreach	Forced removal, citations, sweeps, harsh architecture
Connecting people with their property	Decomissions	Encampment clean-up
Supporting people placed in housing (stabilization)	Coordinated entry & housing assessments	Planned, methodical removals
Safe outdoor spaces	Transportation to shelter or returns to other location	Identifying available housing & engaging landlords

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Phase 1: What is Happening?

Provider takeaway: more resources are needed, some of which are beyond the scope of housing service agencies

- Increased safe, affordable, accessible housing
- Legal services
- Transportation
- Clean-up
- Storage of belongings
- Legislative action



Phase 2: Experiences of People Living in Encampments & Unsheltered Homelessness

Phase 2: Encampment Experiences

Purpose: To hear the experiences, perspectives, & recommendations of people who live in encampments or who are otherwise unsheltered

Methods:

- Interviews + demographic surveys with 300 people in three largest AZ counties (include Phoenix, Tucson, & Yuma)
 - Experiences living in encampments
 - Experiences with encampment resolution strategies & service provision
 - Goals, needs, & recommendations
 - Discrimination & additional thoughts
- Academic & lived experience interviewers

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Phase 2: Encampment Experiences

Context in Arizona

- 2023- closure of major encampment in Phoenix
- 2024- many cities enact camping bans
- 2025- Prop 312 allows for for AZ residents to apply for property tax reimbursement



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Phase 2: Encampment/Unsheltered Residents

Gender	Female	29%
	Male	67%
	Trans male, trans female, two-spirit, other	4%
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic, Latino/a, Chicano/a	34%
	AI/AN	14%
	Asian/AA	1%
	Black/African/AA	21%
	White	47%
	Hawaiian/PI	1%
Veteran	Yes	8%
Earning Income	Yes	19%
Public Benefits	SSI/SSDI	9%
	Medicaid	79%
	Food Stamps/SNAP	71%
	No Benefits	9%

*Do you have **friends/family members** you can talk to about important matters or turn to for help?*

No: 31%

*Do you have **professionals** you can talk to about important matters or turn to for help?*

No: 70%

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Encampment Experiences: Themes

1. Housing is the goal for most people
2. Coordinated entry & pathways to housing were unclear for many people
3. Interactions with the police were often challenging or unhelpful, sometimes abusive



Encampment Experiences: Themes

4. People routinely expressed hope and experiences of discrimination/abuse

5. Social support varies widely

- Some people form communities
- Others reported little to no support

6. Safe low barrier services are desired



Phase 3: Evaluation of Encampment Resolution Strategies

Phase 3: Evaluation of Strategies

Purpose: To learn which & how encampment resolution strategies help people move from unsheltered homelessness→ housing.

Plans:

Partner with 3 organizations to evaluate encampment resolution strategies

- **Housing Central Command**- integrated team street outreach utilizing a disaster response framework
- **Safe Outdoor Space**- sanctioned camping with support services
- **Street outreach**- various approaches

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THANK YOU



Want to talk more?

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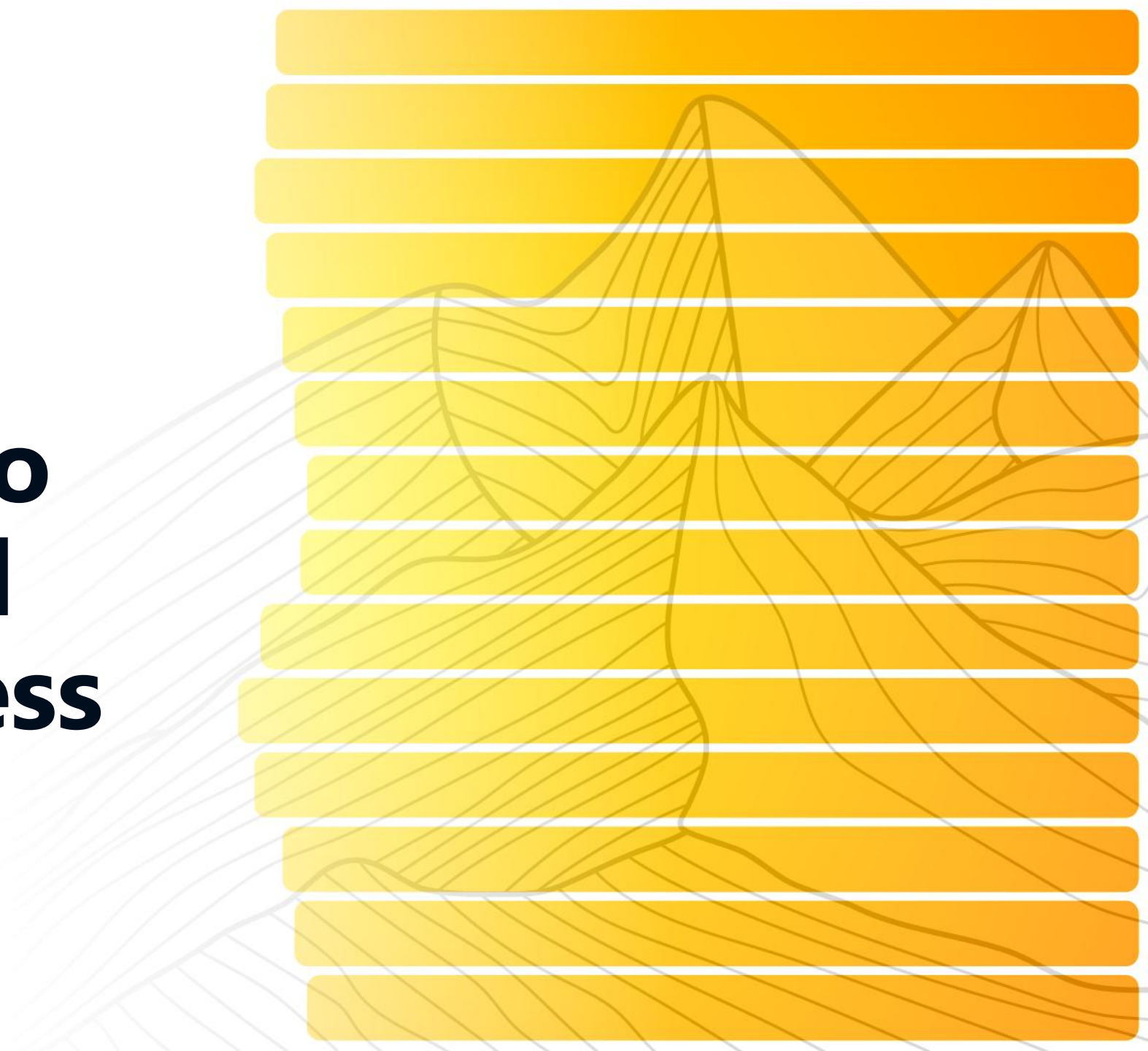
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Productive responses to unsheltered homelessness

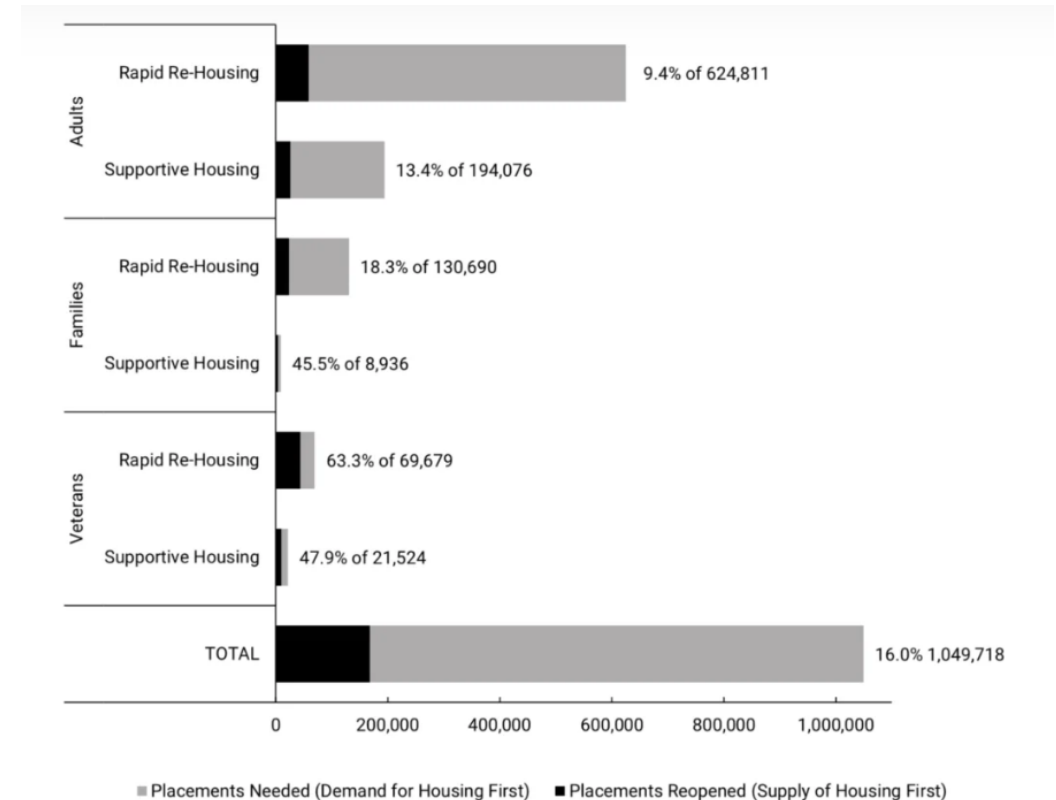


Housing is the answer

Decades of research supports Housing First.

Yet: only 1 in 6 people who stayed in a shelter in a given year have access to housing programs.

The clearest policy solution to unsheltered homelessness is to expand permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing, and other housing solutions.



"How much would it cost to provide Housing First to all households staying in homeless shelters?" Culhane, Fowle, and Moses, 2025.

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Proven Pathways:

Connecting people to housing

- Street outreach
- Emergency shelter
- Encampment response



Reducing the harms of homelessness:

Meeting immediate needs

- WASH services
- Spaces for rest, storage, privacy, and service connections

Meeting urgent health & safety needs

- Street medicine
- Mobile crisis response

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**Homelessness response systems are
innovating faster than research!**

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HUD's Special NOFO to Address Unsheltered Homelessness

- \$420 million to 32 CoCs, announced in early 2023
- Grants last for three years after start date (2023-2026/2024-2027)
- CoCs mostly chose to fund housing



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Early reflections: **HUD's Special NOFO to Address Unsheltered Homelessness**

- The Alliance is following the work of Special NOFO grantees
- Report on how CoCs decided to use the funds:
<https://endhomelessness.org/resources/research-and-analysis/new-federal-funding-boosts-unsheltered-homelessness-response/>
- Ongoing research – checking in annually:
 - Interviews with CoC leads
 - Aggregate data analysis
- Year 1 findings are preliminary



Early reflections:

HUD's Special NOFO to Address Unsheltered Homelessness

- **Investing in coordinated, standardized street outreach** can enable CoCs to reach new people and improve services for people who are unsheltered.
- **Focusing on the transition from unsheltered homelessness to housing** can expedite move-ins by adding staff support, accountability, and flexible resources.

"The people who are outside thought we weren't going to help them. Now that we are regularly engaging with them, that shows our consistency. They now have somebody to talk to and ask for something. That is critical."

-CoC lead in smaller CoC

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Early reflections:

HUD's Special NOFO to Address Unsheltered Homelessness

- **People are moving into housing directly from unsheltered homelessness.** Most people housed in SNOFO PSH & RRH* in the first year had a recorded prior living situation of unsheltered homelessness.
- **Bolstering services in PSH & RRH** (like bringing services on-site or implementing healthcare teams that follow PSH residents no matter where they are located) can help people sustain housing.

"We understand that when folks are losing their housing in PSH, it's because they need a higher level of care, mostly related to mental health or chronic health conditions. Our response to that was to fund and coordinate [more intensive healthcare services]."

-CoC lead in major city CoC

*According to the data we have – which covers about 2/3 of SNOFO communities.

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Early reflections:

HUD's Special NOFO to Address Unsheltered Homelessness

- **Dedicated funding for unsheltered homelessness reportedly improves coordination and focus on response:** including among other community partners and elected officials.
- **A strong front door to homelessness response can offer alternatives to criminalization:** CoCs reported better partnerships with cities, law enforcement, and other partners – and more trust in them to do this work.

"Without outreach [to respond], all [towns] have to do is arrests."

-CoC lead in a rural CoC

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Discussion

1. What do you need information from research about to improve your community's response to unsheltered homelessness?
2. What other strategies are you trying in your communities that may not have been well-researched yet?



Questions?

