

Increase capacity and Improve the Emergency Shelter System to Better Serve Austinites Experiencing Homelessness

There is an estimated one bed for every five people experiencing homelessness in Austin. With inadequate resources for front-end services and shelter and a no-camping policy, the unhoused community faces a crisis when it is illegal for them to sit down or sleep in many places. With the continuing inflow of homelessness and an ongoing camping ban, people experiencing homelessness often have very few options.

Issue 1: Austin does not have enough emergency shelter beds to meet the community's need

A July 2023 Report and Assessment from Austin Public Health and then Homeless Strategy Officer Diana Gray indicated that by 2025 Austin will need shelter beds for 1,519 households, including 1,428 single individuals and 91 families with children.

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While the City has made progress in sheltering women, most men are turned away from shelter on a daily basis. Furthermore, families, refugees and victims of domestic violence are often left with no options at all. People turned away or on waiting lists are living in places not meant for human habitation, which impacts their health and safety, and that of the community as a whole.

The Marshalling Yard and the 8th Street Shelters exist as temporary shelters but the community needs permanent shelter beds.

Issue 2: The shelter system in Austin lacks coordination and is not accessible to many unhoused individuals and providers

- The July 2023 Shelter Assessment recommended that the City establish a coordinated shelter referral and access process, bed management tool and a common intake assessment for city-funded shelters. Because this recommendation has not been implemented, many providers do not have basic information about shelter entry and availability and frequently cannot reach shelter providers or get replies when making inquiries on clients' behalf.
- The *COA also contracted with the National Alliance to End Homelessness in 2018*, which resulted in the [*Recommendations for the Redesign of Emergency Shelters in Austin Report*](#). The report recommended a standardization of operations of all shelters, and that 50 percent of beds be assigned by coordinated entry referral. However, our coordinated entry system is still not used for shelter entry in Austin. The report goes on to say that a community-wide decision-making process should be used to determine prioritization for who gets shelter beds. Because we do not

have a community-wide system, the highest risk individuals often cannot access shelters because there is no formal prioritization process in place.

- The 2018 report stated that shelter is a critical component of homeless response and that anyone experiencing a crisis should be able to easily access shelter. But people experiencing homelessness can typically only refer themselves to shelter by using email and many do not have access to the internet. A homeless person must know an outreach worker to get a bed, and this is not always possible.

Issue 3: The City does not have a comprehensive plan to address homelessness

While the city has enlisted the help of national leaders and consultants over the last six years to address homelessness in Austin, many recommendations have never been implemented. The City's website refers to a 2018 draft plan that was never implemented, and there is reference to a [2021 Summit to Address Unsheltered Homelessness report](#), but it is unclear if this is still being followed. Our community desperately needs a plan to help to some of our highest risk citizens.

A July 2020 report titled [Investing in Results: Priorities and Recommendations for A Systems Approach to End Homelessness](#) called for smaller-scale, trauma informed shelters to address homelessness, but they were never created. The report recommended that ALL unsheltered persons should be provided engagement supports and crisis shelter, but there is currently only one bed for every five people experiencing homelessness.

Reports and national best practices point to the need for a balanced approach in a homelessness response system that addresses all needs along the continuum. Cities must address crisis response and housing stabilization. Austin has chosen to invest more heavily in housing stabilization over the years, resulting in housing for many, but continued, unsheltered homelessness for those with immediate, front-end needs.

[Austin's 2022 Recovery Plan](#) earmarked only \$10 million (about 10 percent) of Austin Rescue Plan Act funding for emergency shelters and crisis services. Crisis response accounted for 25 percent of the City of Austin's homeless service budget in 2024, while housing accounted for over 50 percent.

Only Ten Percent of Austin Rescue Plan Act funding was slated for Crisis Services, compared to over 50 percent earmarked for Housing.

Private donors like Susan and Michael Dell and organizations like Finding Home ATX, Community First Village, Foundation Communities and our Travis County Continuum of Care dollars are all focused primarily on permanent housing. But the crisis response system and shelters are typically not the recipients of those private dollars and efforts. While both Housing and Crisis Response are critical parts of the system, the City is uniquely responsible for the crisis response function.

- ✓ **Recommendation 1: Continue funding the Marshalling Yard until a permanent shelter is open. Expand family shelters and identify locations for shelters in North and South Austin.**
- ✓ **Recommendation 2: Appoint an entity to coordinate all shelter operators in Austin and create a system that is accessible and responsive to community needs. Put a phone number and bed tracking tool in place this summer to give the community real-time information on bed availability in order to help the highest risk individuals and save lives when deadly heat waves occur.**
- ✓ **Recommendation 3: Allocate more funding for Crisis Response in the City's Homeless Services Budget**

Providing shelter is possibly the most important, life-saving role the City of Austin can play to protect the health and safety of the most Austinites experiencing homelessness. While shelter is by no means an end goal for any of our unhoused citizens, it is frequently the most critical first step for them to resolve their homelessness.

- ✓ **Recommendation 4: Create a task force that includes providers and members of the community with lived experience to design an actionable plan with smart goals to address homelessness in Austin and operationalize it in 2025.**
- ✓ **Recommendation 5: Follow national best practice and allow people experiencing homelessness to refer themselves to shelter. This will empower individuals, who know their own needs the best, to resolve their own homelessness.**

These recommendations are supported by the following churches and organizations:

Faith-Based Organizations

*Central Presbyterian Church
 First Baptist Church Austin
 St. Martin's Lutheran Church
 First United Methodist Church, Austin
 Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church
 St. David's Episcopal Church*

Nonprofit Organizations

*Trinity Center
 Austin Mutual Aid
 Street Youth Ministry*

Create a Safe Outdoor Spaces Program for Unhoused Austinites

Hundreds of Austinites are sleeping in tents and in their cars

Though this is not an ideal situation, it is the reality that hundreds face in Austin. There are not enough shelter beds to accommodate people in Austin, and many people cannot afford housing, or find housing with their vouchers. The latest estimate is that there was one shelter bed for every five people experiencing homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness often have no place to legally sit/lie or sleep

The no camping, no sit/lie policy of 2021 has left people with few options. People experiencing homelessness are often moved from place to place and have their belongings discarded by the City. When this happens and people no longer have IDs and birth certificates, for example, they are set back months or even years on the journey to resolve their homelessness. The City does not always notify people when camps are going to be cleaned, and when people's belongings are discarded, it puts a strain on everyone, including service providers. It can also result in a ticket and a criminal record.

There are not enough places for unhoused individuals to store their belongings

Violet KeepSafe Storage has helped hundreds of Austinites keep their belongings safe since 2020, but the need has outgrown the current capacity. When people cannot safely store their items, they cannot go to case management appointments, doctor's appointments or work, and they remain stuck in poor conditions.

Recommendation 1: Duplicate Denver's Safe Outdoor Spaces (SOS) Program in Austin

Denver offers eight [managed camping](#) areas throughout the City. They are managed by a nonprofit contracted through the City of Denver and provide a safe place to sleep for 515 citizens. The spaces are staffed 24 hours, offer services, and have connected 180 people to permanent housing so far. This model offers people an alternative to congregate shelter and reduces the harm that accompanies unsheltered homelessness. Additionally, crime actually reduced in neighborhoods after these safe outdoor spaces were created.

Establishing this program in Austin would acknowledge the reality for people on the streets and eliminate much of the scattered parking and camping that is happening throughout Austin. Governor Abbott addressed the lack of space for our homeless neighbors in 2019 by establishing what is now Camp Esperanza, which has helped hundreds of Austinites. Establishing a program like Denver would be a humane approach that would be a great service to our neighbors without homes and help Austin businesses too.

Recommendation 2: Expand Violet KeepSafe Storage or create an additional space and service where people experiencing homelessness can store their belongings.

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