



The Homeless Advocacy Project identified three policy priorities for Austin leaders to consider funding or adopting in 2026. These solutions do not reflect the entirety of the need and will not end homelessness for most. However, they do rise up as solutions that address the dire immediate needs and reality of the crisis in Austin. Given that the City and County will not be able to house or shelter all of the people experiencing homelessness in Austin, we ask that leaders consider these solutions that will address not only public health and safety for many, but will also give people a space to simply exist when current laws make it difficult for many to do so.

1) Create a plan for a sanctioned camping space and submit to TDHCA to provide a legal space for people experiencing homelessness who must live/camp outdoors.

The City of Austin's no sit/no lie, no camping ordinance leaves many unhoused Austinites with few options.

Enforcement of the ordinance is inconsistent and problematic and little data exists about outcomes.

The **Austin Homeless Strategy Office (AHSO)** and Rapid Response Team close hundreds of homeless encampments each year. Additionally, the State's Department of Public Safety, TxDOT, and Austin Police Department also have the authority to close camps, but the state departments in particular don't often communicate with leaders at the local level.

AHSO does not collect data on where the people in the encampments go after camps are closed. While some go to emergency shelter, only people living in HEAL initiative encampments are guaranteed a bed at a shelter. Many people are left to set up camp in another location.

While effort is made to give notice and clean in a humane manner, people are still being "swept" and critical documents are sometimes discarded, setting people even further back in resolving their homelessness. The fact that there is no legal place for people to camp makes for an impossible situation for unhoused people in Austin.

Nowhere to go

APD Homeless Encampment Enforcement guidelines cite COA Penal Code § 48.05(g), which requires an officer to make a reasonable effort to do the following before or at the time the officer issues a citation, unless the officer determines there is an imminent threat to the health or safety of any person:

- ***Advise the person of a lawful alternative place to camp.***

Currently, APD directs unhoused persons to McKinney Falls State Park or Emma Long Metro Park to camp. **This would cost a person \$620 a month.**

History, and Opportunity

Governor Abbott designated land in 2019 for unhoused people in Austin to camp. The Other Ones Foundation stepped up and provided oversight of the camp, gave people safety and peace of mind, and helped resolve homelessness for hundreds of Austinites since that time.

The Texas Government Code provides that a political subdivision may submit a plan to use a property for homeless individuals to camp to **the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA)**. A template is provided on the website.

Recommendation: Identify property/land and submit a plan to TDHCA to work toward a pragmatic solution to address the crisis.

The City of Austin and Travis County have an important tool at their disposal to provide many people the stability they need to move forward more quickly to resolve their homelessness. Writing and submitting a plan would acknowledge the dire reality that unsheltered Austinites are facing and provide transparency about the clear limitations of COA dollars for housing and sheltering all of our estimated 6,000 homeless Austinites.

2) Create a prioritization system for scarce emergency shelter beds.

Currently, there is no system to prioritize high-risk individuals on the waitlist at the ARCH and 8th Street Shelters. The COA 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 that the city ***Standardize operations of all shelters and use the coordinated entry system for 50 percent of bed referrals***. It also recommended that the City ***use a community-wide decision-making process to determine prioritization for who gets shelter beds***. A **July 2023 Shelter Assessment by Austin Public Health** recommended the City

establish a coordinated shelter referral and access process, utilize a bed management tool and create a common intake assessment for city-funded shelters.

These best practice recommendations were never implemented. The City still has an estimated one bed for every five individuals who are homeless, making it more important than ever that the community have input in how we allow for access to this scarce resource.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Engage the community in a process to create a prioritization system for shelter beds.
- ✓ Use the coordinated entry system for 50 percent of bed referrals.
- ✓ Allocate more beds through the Sunrise hotline to increase accessibility.
- ✓ Utilize the bed-tracking tool in HMIS for better access and efficiency.
- ✓ Ensure that one organization takes the lead in gathering and communicating all shelter resources, contact information and process for entry to the public.

3) Any plan for emergency shelter expansion should prioritize homeless families and at-risk youth.

Austin continues to see rising need among families:

- Families represent a smaller share of the overall homeless population than single adults, but they face **far fewer shelter options** and significantly longer waitlists.
- AISD identifies more than **1,000 students experiencing homelessness** each year under the McKinney-Vento Act, demonstrating the scale of family homelessness in the region.
- Emergency shelters in Austin are consistently full, and families are often left with **no safe indoor options**, forcing many into cars, tents, or other places not meant for habitation.

This lack of family shelter capacity has serious consequences:

- Children experience trauma, hunger, instability, and disrupted learning.
- Parents—especially survivors of domestic violence—face impossible choices between safety and homelessness.

While the City of Austin has added **hundreds of emergency shelter beds for single adults** over the past three years, **no comparable expansion has occurred for families**, despite clear evidence of growing need and support.

Recommendations:

- ✓ No cuts to critical family shelter programs like SAFE and St. Louise House.
- ✓ Address the growing crisis for families and kids before allocating even more funding for shelter replacement and expansion for single adults.

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