

	Guidance: Principles and Practices for Local Responses to Unsheltered Homelessness
	Applicability: Municipalities within the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (LA CoC)
	Approved By and Date: Approved by Policy and Planning Committee – Approved by Commission –

Guiding Principles and Practices for Local Responses to Unsheltered Homelessness

Purpose: Providing Policy Guidance for Municipal Engagement of People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness

Unsheltered homelessness across Los Angeles County creates significant health and safety stressors for the entire community – especially those living on the streets. Strategies to mitigate these stressors must address the concerns of both unsheltered residents and their housed neighbors, as well as further the goal of providing a long-term solution to unsheltered homelessness. The following policy guidance stems from a recognition of Los Angeles’ unique local context, as well as recent court decisions and research into promising practices both locally and nationally.

Background: The Need for Solution-Focused Practices in Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness

Approximately 75% of LA County’s homeless population is unsheltered. On any given night, nearly 40,000 LA County residents experiencing homelessness are sleeping on the streets, in makeshift shelters, in tents, or in their vehicles. This reality necessitates a coordinated regional plan that facilitates access to services and housing for unsheltered residents in order to meaningfully address and end their homelessness.

New resources create an unprecedented opportunity to address homelessness. Local jurisdictions have created new funding streams, such as the City of Los Angeles’ Proposition HHH and the County’s Measure H, while the State of California is beginning to increase resources to permanently house people experiencing homelessness. These investments have expanded and strengthened Los Angeles County’s Coordinated Entry System, which brings together partners, programs, and resources in order to streamline efforts and connect people to the most appropriate housing and services based on their needs.

More time is needed to scale up. Alongside systemic and structural challenges that exacerbate household vulnerabilities, the growth in homelessness stems from decades of underinvestment

at all levels. The long-term decline of resources for affordable housing construction and of preservation of existing affordable housing, as well as rising housing costs and stagnant wages, have made it harder for more people to stay housed and, for those already experiencing homelessness, difficult to access housing they can reasonably afford. Building the necessary housing stock and network of supportive services to get people indoors again will take time.

Until there is enough safe, decent, affordable, and accessible housing for everyone, people will continue to live in public spaces. All sectors of the community must work collectively and collaboratively to mitigate the hazards facing our unsheltered neighbors. Protecting the health and safety of all residents, both housed and unhoused, will create a healthier community for all.

We need to end our neighbors' homelessness, not sweep it out of sight. Fines and citations, encampment clearings, and other municipal practices and policies that disrupt and displace people create additional barriers and setbacks for people experiencing homelessness, making it more likely that people will remain homeless even longer. Connections built with outreach workers and other case managers may dissolve; personal identification documents critical to securing housing may be lost; and accumulated citations may put a person at risk for further law enforcement involvement. These setbacks can be often avoided. Municipal and county services can and should be delivered in a way that recognizes people experiencing unsheltered homelessness' vulnerability and rights as residents, as well as aim to support their needs and facilitate access to interim and permanent housing.

Guidance: Principles for Effective Municipal Engagement

As entities throughout Los Angeles County coordinate their responses to homelessness, adoption of the following policy guidance will help municipalities ensure that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are afforded safer, more accessible places for themselves and their belongings until permanent housing is created and secured for all those in need:

Principle 1: Delivery of municipal services must respect the needs of all residents, with special considerations for serving the unsheltered population.

- a. Meet people where they are. People experiencing unsheltered homelessness are vulnerable, and may need multiple positive engagements before trust is built. Respect autonomy and a person's decision about whether to engage or to accept services and which services to accept. Be patient and consult with the individual to identify their needs and how to best meet them.
- b. Be guided by compassion and empathy in all interactions. Take special consideration of a person's immediate needs, including making appropriate and reasonable accommodations for people living with physical and mental disabilities. Use a trauma-

informed approach to avoid doing harm through re-traumatization and impeding a person's progress toward their goals.

- c. Acknowledge a person's unique context and experiences. Offer services sensitively and appropriately when interacting with vulnerable individuals, with an awareness of implicit bias related to race, ethnicity, culture, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, housing status, and other characteristics. Mental illness and other medical conditions may limit a person's ability to communicate effectively.
- d. Consult with unsheltered residents meaningfully. Persons experiencing homelessness are the experts in their own lived experience. Partner together to identify gaps in and opportunities for improved practices. Provide avenues for receiving meaningful public feedback, including clear grievance processes to improve responses.

Principle 2: People experiencing homelessness have the same civil rights as housed residents and should not be subject to discrimination or arbitrary treatment based on housing status.

- a. Serve the needs of housed and unhoused residents equitably. People experiencing homelessness are residents who deserve the same access to public services – such as sanitation, restroom and hygiene facilities, and protection by law enforcement – as their housed neighbors. Commit to protecting the civil rights as well as the public health and safety of all people in the community, with the recognition that people living on the streets are especially vulnerable to victimization.
- b. Municipal ordinances should not criminalize homelessness. Ordinances that limit necessary, life-sustaining activities such as sitting, sleeping, or eating in public spaces unfairly target people living on the streets. In the absence of adequate alternative or private places to undertake those activities, people have a right to perform these activities in public. Evaluate ordinances for disparate impacts on persons experiencing homelessness.
- c. Consider the special needs and circumstances of the situation. When approaching a person experiencing homelessness in order to conduct municipal services, consider the activity they are undertaking and approach with respect; limit the interruption of life-sustaining behavior such as sleeping in public. The activities of persons experiencing homelessness should not be subject to more scrutiny than that of a housed person.
- d. Approach with a goal of engagement, not enforcement. Interactions focused on engagement are more likely to build trust and rapport than those that lead with the goal of enforcement. Standard law enforcement activities such as requests for identification can be perceived as threatening, harassing, or intimidating and therefore disruptive to successful service connections.

- e. Pursue alternatives to enforcement, citation, and arrest. Citing and arresting unsheltered residents for low-level or quality of life infractions and/or life-sustaining activities can be emotionally and physically traumatizing – as well as disruptive to progress toward ending their homelessness. Law enforcement officers should utilize citation or arrest as a last resort and instead promote referrals to services, even when services have been previously declined.
- f. Develop policies and integrate systems in support of diversion practices. Fines and jail-time make it more challenging for a homeless resident to achieve stability, work toward their goals, and secure employment and/or long-term housing. Consider systems improvements such as pre-arrest diversion programs and programs that dismiss citations for low-level, non-violent crimes and connect homeless residents to services in lieu of fines and/or jail.

Principle 3: All people, both housed and unhoused, deserve access to safe public spaces as well as services that promote health and safety for all.

- a. Take an outreach-focused approach to encampments and unsheltered persons. Outreach staff are specially trained to build relationships, learn what people need, and connect them to those resources. Coordinate the delivery of municipal services with existing regional homeless outreach efforts and social services infrastructure so that they have the time and space they need to do their work.
- b. Provide available public health resources for residents experiencing homelessness. Ensuring that unsheltered residents have regular access to water, personal hygiene, and sanitation resources, as well as containers for safe needle disposal and hazardous waste promotes public health for all.
- c. Create accessible storage facilities for personal belongings to allow unsheltered residents the opportunity to safeguard their important possessions. Hours, location, and identification requirements should support the needs of unsheltered residents.
- d. Ensure public areas are accessible to all by providing clear guidance about access and egress. Ensure that unsheltered residents are aware of the local standards through adequate signage, and that measures are in place to support their consistent application.
- e. Follow clear and person-centered protocol when conducting sanitation activities to ensure consistency and regularity. Best practices recommend that outreach workers be consulted in determining timelines to allow for effective outreach, and that public notice is provided at least 72 hours in advance of any sanitation activity and waste

receptacles are made available to allow residents to prepare their belongings for cleaning. Except for immediate health hazards, there should be no removal or destruction of items. All immediate health hazards should be documented and reported.

- f. Facilitate opportunities for community education on homelessness. The expectation for immediate resolutions to unsheltered homelessness drives short-term, counterproductive responses that often fail to resolve homelessness for unhoused residents and may even prolong an individual's homelessness. Publicly share information about the unique needs of persons experiencing homelessness as well as strategic efforts underway to address their needs and end their homelessness. Provide opportunities to constructively engage community efforts to support people experiencing homelessness.

Sources

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