Principles and Practices for Local Responses to Unsheltered Homelessness:
Guidance for Municipalities

Purpose: Providing Policy Guidance for Effective Municipal Engagement of Street-Based Homelessness

Street-based 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 share the goal of providing a long-term solution to street-based homelessness. The following policy guidance stems from a recognition of Los Angeles’ unique local context, as well as research into promising practices both locally and nationally.

Background: The Need for Solution-Focused Practices

Approximately 75% of LA County’s homeless population is street-based: On any given night, nearly 40,000 LA County residents experiencing homelessness are sleeping on the streets, in make-shift shelters, in tents, or in their vehicles. This reality necessitates a coordinated plan and process to ensure linkages to services and housing for these residents in order to meaningfully address their homelessness.

An unprecedented opportunity: The resources created to address homelessness over the last two years are unprecedented; 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 targeting homelessness.

Time needed to scale up: But the problems of homelessness in Los Angeles and across the nation stem from decades of underinvestment at all levels. Creating the required stock of housing, service capacity, and coordination across systems of care in order to significantly reduce homelessness will take time.

Until there is enough housing for everyone, people will continue to live in public spaces. We must mitigate the hazards facing them. Protecting the right to health and safety for all residents, both housed and unhoused, will create a healthier community overall.
We need to end our neighbors’ homelessness, not move it around. Enforcement, sanitation, and other municipal practices and policies that discriminate against homelessness or displace residents into nearby neighborhoods disrupt the ability of the homeless crisis response system to make meaningful service connections aimed at addressing and ending their homelessness.

Guidance: Principles for Effective Municipal Engagement

As entities throughout Los Angeles coordinate in response to its homelessness crisis, LAHSA offers the following guidance for addressing unsheltered homelessness:

**Principle 1: Delivery of municipal services must respect the needs of all residents, with special considerations for serving its most vulnerable.**

a. **Commit to serving all.** People experiencing homelessness are residents who deserve the same access to public services such as sanitation and public safety as their housed neighbors. Commit to protecting the civil rights as well as the public health and safety of all people in the community.

b. **Respect autonomy and self-governance for unsheltered residents.** Practices that foster autonomy and self-governance include recognizing a resident’s freedom to choose to accept services and upholding their constitutionally protected expectation of privacy in their personal belongings.

c. **Frequent, meaningful consultation.** People experiencing unsheltered homelessness are extremely vulnerable; consult with them to address their needs and to avoid doing additional harm. Provide avenues for receiving meaningful public feedback, including clear grievance processes.

d. **Offer services** that are sensitive and appropriate with regard to race, ethnicity, culture, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Use a trauma-informed approach.¹

**Principle 2: All people need safe and accessible places to be, both at night and during the day, and places to securely store belongings, until permanent housing is found.**

a. **Promote investment in new housing resources**, such as interim, affordable, and permanent housing with supportive services.

b. **Take an outreach-focused approach to connecting** encampments and unsheltered persons to supportive services and housing opportunities. Connect municipal outreach efforts with regional coordination of homeless outreach teams. Provide outreach staff the time and space needed to build relationships with unsheltered residents.

c. **Law enforcement should serve and protect** all people, including those experiencing homelessness.

¹ See the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) overview of trauma-informed care at www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-housing/trauma-informed-care for more information.
d. **Create accessible storage facilities.** Practices that foster accessibility include mobile storage, extended hours, and no identification requirement.

**Principle 3: No person should suffer or be subject to discrimination or arbitrary treatment based on housing status.**

a. **Municipal ordinances should avoid criminalization of homelessness.** Ordinances that limit necessary, life-sustaining activities such as sitting, sleeping, or eating in public unfairly target people without adequate alternative places to undertake those activities.

b. **Avoid initiation of law enforcement interactions without good cause.** Street-based residents should not be subjected to initiation of criminal law enforcement activities (e.g. request for identification) so long as they are not engaged in unlawful activities.

c. **Consider the special needs and circumstances of the situation.** Refrain from initiating contacts that interrupt innocent activity or life-sustaining behavior in the absence of an adequate private alternative place to undertake those activities.

d. **Determine appropriate alternatives to citation or arrest if possible.** Citing and fining unsheltered residents for quality of life infractions is emotionally as well as physically disruptive; by putting them at risk for further law enforcement involvement, citations create barriers to securing long-term housing. In the case of these infractions or other low-level crimes, officers should offer referrals to services instead of arrests.

e. **Apply enforcement standards fairly and consistently.** Engagement with an unsheltered person must be subject to the same requirements as are applicable to engagement of any other person, and standards must be applied consistently.

**Principle 4: Support the health and safety of all community residents, including unsheltered residents.**

a. **Provide regular access to water, personal hygiene, and sanitation resources,** as well as containers for safe needle disposal and hazardous waste to unsheltered residents in order to promote public health for all.

b. **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 and that the standards are applied consistently.

c. **Respond transparently and promptly to community concerns about unsheltered residents.** Create transparent processes for all residents to make service requests in support of their unsheltered neighbors.

d. **Sanitation activities must follow clear and person-centered protocol.** In advance of any sanitation activity, provide sufficient public notice (at least 72 hours) and access to waste receptacles to allow residents to prepare their belongings for cleaning. Unless an immediate health hazard, there should be no removal or destruction of items designated by the occupant as a personal belonging or recognized as personal property. All immediate health hazards should be documented and reported.

e. **Assist with moving and storage** to enable residents to retain their possessions.