

HENNEPIN COUNTY

MINNESOTA

Housing Stability strategy, 2020-2025

Making homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring

Hennepin County holds two core beliefs about homelessness:

Homelessness is unacceptable.

Nobody should be without the safety, security and dignity of a home

We have solutions to homelessness.

Our committed and collaborative efforts have shown we are capable of mobilizing resources to help keep people in their homes or help them find and sustain new homes.

Efforts to respond to and address homelessness – and the challenges in doing so – are constantly evolving. In recent years, our community has allocated unprecedented resources to homelessness and housing programs in response to global, national and local crises that have disproportionately harmed our most vulnerable residents.

In this document, we set out the strategic priorities that have emerged from and guided us through these challenges and these investments. Data has informed our priorities – we can see what has been successful – as has input from people with lived experience of housing instability and homelessness.

The central premise of this strategy is that reducing homelessness is achievable only if people exit homelessness more quickly than new people enter homelessness. The majority of those who exit homelessness must be able to sustain their housing.

Hennepin County's three-pronged approach moves that strategy forward. We aim to make homelessness:

Rare

Reduce the number of new entries into homelessness

Brief

Accelerate the rate at which people who experience homelessness can exit into permanent housing

Nonrecurring

Minimize the number of returns to homelessness for people who have previously exited into housing

Fundamental principles

As we seek to make homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring, all investments, programs and strategies should be aligned with the following precepts:

1. Housing is the foundation for health and well-being and is fundamental to success in education and employment.
2. Everyone experiencing housing instability and homelessness deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.
3. Everyone has their own unique blend of strengths, resources and experiences. They are the experts on their circumstances
4. Housing instability and homelessness most harms communities of color in Hennepin County; our services should be culturally responsive wherever practicable.
5. Homelessness is often both the cause and the consequence of trauma; services and systems must be trauma-informed.
6. Those working within the system, not those who require assistance, should shoulder the burden of navigating complex systems, funding streams and programs.
7. The priority when working with people experiencing homelessness – in sheltered or unsheltered settings – should be helping those individuals and households access housing as a matter of urgency.
8. Emergency homeless shelters should be easy to access by people experiencing homelessness but should not be considered a place for people with no income or low income to reside indefinitely.
9. Unsheltered homelessness represents a serious health and safety risk and is not a dignified form of shelter.
10. Housing ends homelessness. Everyone is housable.

Theory of change

Common threads in our most successful work

We can accelerate housing outcomes for people in crisis and maximize all housing resources in our community if we allocate a designated worker who takes accountability for helping achieve a housing outcome through existing resources as a matter of absolute urgency.

Our community must continually increase and enhance the quantity, quality and variety of deeply affordable and supportive housing programs to better meet demand and match people's needs and priorities.

All strategies, policies and services must be developed in partnership with people with lived experience of housing instability and homelessness and be informed by the impact of trauma, as well as racial and gender identity, age and sexual orientation.

Making homelessness rare

Evictions destabilize households' safety, well-being, educational stability, and employment opportunities. Preventing evictions and, particularly, new experiences of homelessness minimize the crisis and trauma for households and reduces pressure on emergency shelter systems.

Recent and long-term history suggest that evictions are a key driver of family homelessness. Even when evictions do not immediately lead to homelessness, they may begin a process of long-term instability that ultimately leads to homelessness. Having an eviction record creates long-lasting barriers to securing stable housing.

Homelessness and evictions are caused by a combination of lack of economic stability – a lack of financial resources to pay rent causes upwards of 90% of all evictions – and adverse life events. Assisting people through efficient and accessible community-connected partnerships is key to effectively preventing evictions and homelessness.

We know what's worked: Prevention

Expanded prevention services and engagement with systems that serve low-income households – including the extensive Minneapolis Public Schools-based Stable Homes Stable Schools initiative – contributed to a 50% decrease of shelter use among families from 2014 to 2019. A further additional 50% decrease coincided with the COVID pandemic, largely attributable to the widespread availability of the pandemic/COVID-response emergency rental assistance program and extensive protections against eviction implemented by the state and federal government.

We've heard: The 'runaround' is counterproductive

A 2019 study into evictions by the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs identified the "social service runaround" to describe the process of collecting forms, paperwork, and permissions at different places, within a frame of limited information. Drawing on personal feedback from people who had sought assistance highlighted the inefficiencies inherent in such a system as well as the negative impact on the well-being of vulnerable people.

This study led to an ongoing collaborative effort in Hennepin County to strengthen connections between agencies and nonprofits that offer housing and eviction resources to ease the runaround for those seeking assistance and to streamline the work for resource navigators.

Priorities and strategies for 2020-2025

1. Expand partnerships with, and build capacity in systems that interact with at-risk households

Prevention efforts work best when they are done in partnership with the larger public systems that serve low-income residents. School districts, Public Housing Authorities and public and private health and human services organizations are key partners in creating a unified ecosystem of prevention services.

Almost every Hennepin County department that serves residents reports that housing stability is a major concern, showing that housing is everyone's business. Child welfare,

corrections, workforce development, public health, behavioral health, justice and other areas should be equipped to identify housing instability and help people connect to mainstream resources or refer to more intensive supports to assist with housing stability as needed.

2. Simplify and streamline delivery of emergency financial assistance

Residents should be able to access rental assistance and financial assistance programs through a single streamlined application process. Minimizing the steps involved in seeking assistance – including steps related to documentation or status updates – serves to dignify the experience while maximizing efficiency in getting assistance to households as quickly as possible.

3. Pursue opportunities to provide ongoing rental assistance to at-risk households

In partnership with Public Housing Authorities, Hennepin County should pursue all opportunities that arise for new and expanded rental assistance for households for whom housing instability and homelessness creates the greatest risks. We should support development of service packages in partnership with the systems that are helping identify and connect households to these resources.

4. Provide case management supports for the most at-risk households

Households with significant barriers to housing stability may require one-to-one support alongside financial assistance to prevent loss of their housing. Programs that provide case management alongside financial assistance should be targeted to those who are most at risk of homelessness. Service prioritization is especially challenging in the case of prevention – as we prioritize services based on a crisis that has not yet happened. We will need to use data and predictive analytics to determine who is most in need of services.

5. Ensure legal representation for low-income households facing eviction

Evictions are a legal process and renters who cannot afford representation are at a disadvantage in legal disputes. Landlords have greater familiarity with the process and its participants and are most always represented by counsel. Linking renters with dedicated legal representation has proven to reduce eviction rates and eviction records, thereby reducing future barriers to housing. Free legal representation is key to promoting housing stability.

Making homelessness brief

When homelessness cannot be avoided, it needs to be resolved as quickly as possible. As a matter of urgency our community needs to assist those who are experiencing homelessness in our shelters, on our streets and in places not fit for human habitation so they can swiftly move into housing.

A Housing First approach posits that housing is foundational and underpins effective strategies to address other health and wellbeing concerns, such as mental health or chemical dependency challenges. Consequently, we do not believe in preconditions to housing, or that the challenges people may experience while homeless mean they are not ready for housing or in any way not housable. We believe quite the opposite: that whatever challenges someone is going through, housing is the foundational need that must be addressed as soon as possible.

We know what works: Housing-focused case management

Over the course of 2021 Hennepin County saw an estimated 50% increase in the rate of exits to permanent housing for single adults experiencing homelessness across the community. A housing-focused case management team helped 464 people who were senior citizens or who were medically high-risk to move to permanent housing, largely driving this achievement. These efforts also contributed to the longest sustained reduction of the number of people using single adult shelter on record and the longest sustained period during which daily demand for those shelters was fully met.

We've heard: People with lived experience must help shape policy

Street Voices of Change (SVoC) is an advocacy group comprised of people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness. In 2019, SVoC developed a Shelter Bill of Rights to capture their highest-priority reforms for emergency shelters. The 10 items in the Shelter Bill of Rights – covering interpersonal treatment, security, storage, availability of case management and other needs – are now embedded in Hennepin County shelter contracts. They provide a framework for understanding the priorities of people who have used – or who have opted out of – the shelter system.

Priorities and strategies for 2020-2025

1. Help people access community-based resources as an alternative to shelter

People prefer to have control over their options and avoid entering the shelter system when possible. Shelter diversion is an emerging national best practice in which staff work intensively with people when they newly present as homeless to identify and access safe alternatives to traditional shelter. Flexible financial resources are available for rent arrears, transportation, utilities, and other costs that present a barrier to housing. To be most efficient, effective and aligned with our fundamental principles, shelter diversion should be streamlined through a systemwide process and should begin before people begin to utilize more intensive services.

2. Lower barriers to emergency shelter

When people have no alternatives, shelter should be easy to access, available for the duration of their housing emergency and focused on helping them resolve that emergency as quickly as possible. There are reasons other than capacity that people may be unable or unwilling to access shelter. By identifying and meeting the stated needs of people experiencing homelessness – with a particular focus on the Shelter Bill of Rights – we increase the likelihood that people will opt in to shelter and avoid the extreme health and safety risks inherent in unsheltered homelessness. One of the most prominent needs people have voiced is for assistance with a swift pathway to permanent housing, emphasizing the need to resolve the ‘emergency’ in emergency shelter. Shelter should not be viewed as a long-term solution for anybody experiencing homelessness.

3. Provide person-centered support focused on urgently moving to housing

Trained case managers should work alongside each person to develop a realistic, person-centered housing plan with clear responsibility and accountability for completion. Residents achieve housing outcomes most rapidly when housing is treated as the highest and most urgent priority. Focusing on existing housing resources leads to better-informed decision making, swifter completion of required documentation and processes and fewer missed opportunities for housing.

4. Maximize efficient and effective use of homeless-designated resources

Demand exceeds supply for homeless designated housing programs in the Coordinated Entry System. Lack of adequate supply requires equitable, consistent and transparent prioritization based on community-agreed need and risk factors. Additionally, the conversion rate at which housing referrals turn into successful housing outcomes must increase while we reduce the average time from referral to housing outcome. We can best achieve this goal through continuous improvement in accurately identifying program eligibility, centering client choice in housing type and ensuring that all staff involved swiftly and fully support their clients throughout the process.

5. Maximize use of mainstream housing resources

Approximately 80% of the housing outcomes achieved through the housing-focused case management team were achieved outside of the homeless designated housing programs allocated through the Coordinated Entry System. This is both necessary – given the mismatch between supply and demand in the system – and desirable as it widens choice and increases the total supply of housing options. Staff interacting with people experiencing homelessness should be knowledgeable of, and help people actively pursue, mainstream housing resources, particularly through Public Housing Authorities.

Making homelessness nonrecurring

Our community's portfolio of affordable and supportive housing is the most critical resource in reducing and ending the cycle of homelessness. Hennepin County has increasingly leveraged federal and state funds to expand community-based rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing programs through HUD's Continuum of Care, Minnesota Housing's Family Homeless Prevention and Assistance Program and the Minnesota Department of Human Service's Housing Support programs.

Even so, demand for affordable housing far exceeds supply. Emerging challenges, such as those emanating from the opioid epidemic, continue to require more intensive and different supports. Moving forward, we need to ensure that the quantity, quality and variety of housing programs continues to grow to meet the various needs of our most vulnerable residents and to ensure that those who exit homelessness for housing are positioned for success and to avoid returns to homelessness.

We know what works: Permanent supportive housing

Hennepin County's focused efforts to reduce chronic homelessness since mid-2017 has helped more than 1,000 people with disabilities and histories of long-term homelessness move into housing. Even with the significant barriers that many faced, these efforts have achieved a 94% sustainability rate to date (not returning to homelessness in Hennepin County). This demonstrates that the housing interventions being accessed – particularly permanent supportive housing but also mainstream and time limited resources when those represent a better fit – work for almost everyone. This is true even for those with long histories of homelessness and significant barriers to housing stability.

We have heard: Systems must not impede mobility

Hennepin County partnered with C4 Innovations on their Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities action research and engaged them to help design a more equitable coordinated entry process. C4 conducted listening sessions with people with lived experience of homelessness and heard a consensus that existing housing funding streams and programs were not fully meeting the needs of people using the system.

In particular, the limited amount of income that people retain if their housing is funded through the Housing Support program was a major challenge that keeps people in a cycle of poverty and prevents people from saving money and increasing their self-reliance. Hennepin County adopted a legislative platform to call for reform of the program in 2022 and is seeking alternative models of Housing Support and increased capacity in other supportive housing models.

Priorities and strategies for 2020-2025

1. Increase supply of targeted permanent supportive housing
Permanent supportive housing works, even for people with multiple barriers to housing success. Hennepin County has set a bold vision to create 1,000 new units for our most

vulnerable residents over 10 years. This initiative also seeks to accelerate the development of units by providing more local funding earlier in the development process. This is one of many tools to increase the physical housing supply in partnership with federal, state and local partners. We must maximize these housing development efforts and prioritize resources for projects that will serve high-risk and homeless households earning less than 30% area median income.

2. [Increase supply of single-room occupancy housing](#)

Single-room occupancy (SRO) housing presents an opportunity to provide basic independent housing that is affordable and accessible to people with very low incomes who can only afford modest rents, including people experiencing homelessness. More than 20% of people in emergency shelters have some form of earned income but it is insufficient to sustain an existing one-bedroom or studio apartment. As our region continues to face significant affordable housing challenges, SRO housing presents an opportunity to increase the supply of dignified housing affordable to people at the lowest income levels. This is currently the largest gap in the housing market.

3. [Maximize mainstream support services, including Medicaid Housing Stabilization Services](#)

Many people simply need an apartment they can afford. Some require specific or intensive supportive programming to be successful. Others, however, may need varied levels of support at different times to help stabilize once they are in housing. To best meet these needs, we must help community providers to leverage community supports and dedicated funds, including billing through Medicaid.

4. [Seek reforms and alternatives to the Housing Support program](#)

While the Housing Support program serves as a high-impact resource for communities and we must continue to maximize this resource, the structure also leaves people who are receiving Social Security Income to pay almost 90% of their income toward housing. This requirement traps people in poverty, while leading others to refuse housing – even while experiencing homelessness – or exit their housing in order to preserve financial flexibility. Alternative models for the Housing Support program exist and should be expanded to better and more equitably meet clients' needs. We must pursue further reforms or alternative federal and state funding sources to provide more diverse housing and subsidy options, including Rapid ReHousing and other time limited models.

5. [Create pathways to training and employment](#)

People who have experienced homelessness often want to work and in many cases are already working but are earning an income that doesn't meet their basic needs. Access to employment coaching and skills development through training and education, along with job placement and retention assistance, will support people toward greater independence and self-sufficiency in their housing.

Infrastructure

The strategies to make homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring in Hennepin County are contingent upon a system that has the infrastructure necessary to implement them. In particular, the following areas require ongoing development and investment:

Racial equity

Homelessness in Hennepin County is overwhelmingly experienced by people of color. Black residents make up 13% of the general population of Hennepin County but approximately 60% of people experiencing homelessness. This is significantly higher than already disproportionate rates of poverty. We see an even more extreme example with the Native American community where representation among people experiencing homelessness is again much higher than already disproportionate rates of poverty.

We must work at all levels to develop a workforce that reflects the communities being served, including people with lived experience of housing instability and homelessness. All our systems, agencies, programs and services should center a racial equity lens. We should disaggregate all performance data by race to monitor and address any disproportionate service outcomes.

Data systems

We need to be able to track inflow (the rate and number of people entering homelessness over time) and outflow (the rate and number of people exiting homelessness over time) to know if we are moving toward our goal of reducing homelessness. We need individual-level information on the needs and priorities of people experiencing homelessness and housing instability to connect them to the right services. Real-time performance data is critical to effectively monitor, assess and continually improve the programs and services that are deployed toward our three goals. To make homelessness increasingly rare, brief and nonrecurring, we must be guided by data on the nature of the challenge and what is working best to address it.

To meet our data needs we need to commit to, invest in and build system capacity for a shared Homeless Management Information System that can fulfill these functions and otherwise support our collective goals.

Personnel

The capacity of staff and leadership drives the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the homelessness response system. The capacity and availability of the staff dictate the quality and performance of services and programs. Leadership capacity across the multiple entities that operate as part of the homeless response system dictate the extent to which there can be shared vision, collaboration and coordination.

We should take steps to ensure that all staff who serve clients have the appropriate training and support to provide trauma-informed, housing-focused care and that leaders have the requisite skills to provide shared vision and coordination.

Lived experience

Systems and services will only work for people if those same people are able to inform and guide them. We must incorporate varying personal experiences and perceptions into our collective understanding of people's needs. We can only make homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring if we center our work on the insights of those who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness and housing instability in our community.

To authentically center the voices of people with lived experience, we need to engage with and listen to people, and to the advocacy groups that represent them. We also need to share decision-making power in funding and resource-allocation through the Lived Experience Advisory Group and Youth Action Board, composed of members who are appropriately compensated for their time.