

ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Homelessness appears to be on the rise in the U.S., presenting a troubling and challenging societal problem that's holding the attention of policymakers, service organizations, business groups, and more. While statistics on homelessness can be unreliable, anecdotally the challenge has become abundantly clear, whether it's an increase in individuals needing services, the prevalence of tent camps in major cities, or even tenants expressing concerns about downtown conditions as they plan returns to the office during the pandemic. Homelessness is a national problem, not limited to a few areas or to the largest cities. The commercial real estate sector is jumping in to help out and is seeking ways to continue playing a productive role.

THE CRE PERSPECTIVE



Homelessness has long been a difficult problem in the U.S. The needs are great, and the challenges are complex. The problem is apparently only increasing, and some statistics appear to support that view. Reliable data on the homeless population is particularly difficult to come by, but a good effort is made by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which performs a point-in-time count in preparing its Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress. To summarize a few key points from the HUD 2020 report (which predates the COVID-19 pandemic that may have further exacerbated the situation):

- **There are a great number of homeless Americans.** On a single night in 2020, approximately 580,000 people were experiencing homelessness in the U.S.
- **Homelessness is increasing.** For the fourth consecutive year, the HUD report measured an increase in homelessness nationwide.
- **Most homeless individuals are sheltered.** 61% were staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, while 39% were in unsheltered locations such as on the street, in abandoned buildings, or in other places not suitable for habitation.
- **The unsheltered population is increasing.** Between 2019 and 2020, the number of unsheltered individuals increased by seven percent while the number of sheltered individuals remained essentially unchanged.

Advocacy in Action

~ DENVER ~ COLORADO

From an advocacy perspective, BOMA local associations haven't hesitated to jump in to support the homeless community—BOMA/Spokane, for instance, rallied against a city council proposal that aimed to severely restrict the number of beds at a new transitional shelter. It can become tricky, however, when the impacts of policy proposals to assist the homeless population—however well-intended—aren't so clear.

In Denver, a 2019 ballot initiative was the first opportunity in the country for voters to weigh in on whether homeless people should have what supporters called the "right to survive." The initiative aimed to overturn a citywide ban on "camping" that effectively criminalizes people who live in tents, parked cars, and public spaces if they refuse services or refuse to relocate. But even homeless advocates disagreed on whether the ban should stay or go.

BOMA/Denver Metro joined a large and diverse coalition of voices arguing in favor of keeping the camping ban and against the ballot initiative—a coalition that eventually included business groups, local and national homelessness advocacy organizations, and the city agency on homelessness. The groups argued that protecting the right to sleep on the streets isn't beneficial to homeless individuals, and would have the unintended consequence of making it more difficult to provide needed services. The coalition succeeded; to the surprise of many observers, the initiative was soundly defeated, with an overwhelming 81% of voters voting 'no.'

- **The number of unsheltered families with children is increasing.** In 2020, nearly 172,000 people in families with children were experiencing homelessness, and while the vast majority were sheltered, the number of unsheltered families increased by 13%.
- **Homelessness is not only an urban issue.** Nearly 60% of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness did so in an urban area, while 22% were in a suburban setting and 20% were in a rural area.

Beyond the statistics and trends, homelessness has proven to be a difficult challenge to address. All efforts to help the situation are worthwhile, but large-scale progress has been largely elusive. Looking at the evidence, two main points become very clear:

- **There's no silver-bullet solution.** Individuals end up homeless for a myriad list of reasons, and attempts to address any one piece of the equation rarely have a great effect. Solutions must be comprehensive and long-term.
- **What works in one place may not translate to another.** The situation differs city to city and region to region, but it can be helpful to learn from others and borrow new ideas.

BOMA local associations can confirm the widespread prevalence of homelessness, both as a community challenge and as a policy priority. In the most recent annual State and Local Issues Survey, 72% of BOMA local associations reported working on homelessness as an advocacy issue in 2021--that represents the highest number of any issue in the survey outside of the COVID-19 response. BOMA International and the local associations are actively engaged on the issue, both in working toward policy solutions and providing volunteer hours and financial support.

To assist, we have also been collecting ideas that work--public or private, large or small—from across the country. Following are just a few examples of the many programs recommended by our local associations as examples of successful efforts. This is far from exhaustive, and not all ideas are replicable, but it represents what's possible.

LEADING EXAMPLES

~ SALT LAKE CITY ~ UTAH

A comprehensive public-private effort to replace a traditional shelter with a better system

The city partnered with the private sector to explore comprehensive solutions, and arrived at a simple but cutting-edge concept: multiple shelters that would each focus on different populations and needs. The city would attempt to end the “warehouse” model for delivering homeless resources and instead focus more on moving people off the streets for good. There are now new, separate shelters for women, men, and families; clients have access to meals, basic health care, job assistance, and housing assessments. With help from the state, an additional effort has been funded to support moving some individuals into permanent housing.

The plan isn’t in a vacuum. The city is undertaking an aggressive approach to deter “professional” panhandlers--including signs and ads warning the public, and repurposing parking meters to accept change for homeless service providers—and has invested in its Homeless Engagement and Response Team (HEART). Time will tell if the new, comprehensive approach is successful—it hasn’t always been a smooth transition and the total number of available beds will actually be less than the previous model—but it appears to be heading in the right direction.

~ AUSTIN ~ TEXAS

An unprecedented and inspiring residential program that benefits the entire community

Focused on supporting men and women coming out of chronic homelessness, Community First! Village is a 51-acre, master planned development that provides affordable, permanent housing and a supportive community. Using 100% private funding, the village of 500 small homes gives residents a sense of community and support through social services and physical and mental medical care. Amenities include community kitchens, laundry and washrooms, meeting halls, playgrounds, dog park, barber shop, outdoor movie theater, community market, and medical facility.

Residents pay rent, and also help out around the village to ensure pride in the environment. A central focus is skills development and income generation; administrators, staff and counselors put together daily activities, counseling services, job placement and mentoring. Residents provide services to the community including art, screen printing, blacksmithing, auto care, event hosting/catering, and an organic produce market.

**~ HOUSTON ~
TEXAS**

**A coalition that
orchestrates regional
efforts and makes every
dollar count**

The Coalition for the Homeless is a nonprofit that serves as the lead agency to the local homeless response system and coordinates with other organizations to provide services. The system, known as The Way Home, provides permanent housing and supportive services for homeless individuals and families. The coalition works to leverage funding at an impressive rate--for every dollar the coalition receives in private funding, it generates more than \$37 in public funding to implement homelessness solutions. The coalition states that over the past decade, homelessness in the Houston region has decreased by half and more than 24,000 people have been placed into permanent housing programs.

The Way Home is now bringing in more partners--faith leaders, nonprofits, and the business community--to create a fundraising effort called Meaningful Change. The program has the tagline, "Not Spare Change," and it promotes donations to a fund that will provide direct services to homeless individuals, as opposed to donations of spare change to panhandlers that some believe can prolong homelessness. Every dollar donated to the fund goes directly to helping clients move into permanent housing, and provides furniture, household basics, and one-time fees and deposits.

**~ BOSTON ~
MASSACHUSETTS**

**A fifty-year old
organization that remains
a national model for youth
services**

Bridge Over Troubled Waters is a 50-year old organization that provides innovative services to runaway, homeless, and high-risk youth. Founded by a dedicated group of teachers who were members of the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph, the organization's mission is to help Boston's youth develop skills to avoid dependency on social services and to teach self-sufficiency, enabling them to transform their lives and build fulfilling, meaningful futures for themselves.

In addition to providing food and innovative programs to reach the most vulnerable, Bridge Over Troubled Waters also collaborates with a group of physicians from Massachusetts General Hospital and staffs a first-of-its-kind, volunteer-run, mobile medical van to bring emergency and preventive health care to the streets. Other programs include a daily "foot patrol" of trained volunteers, licensed clinical counselors, a drop-in day center, and transitional residential programs for youth and for single mothers.

**~ PHILADELPHIA ~
PENNSYLVANIA**

**A unique partnership
between a social services
agency, a transportation
authority and a municipality**

Project HOME has worked for over 30 years to end chronic street homelessness and alleviate poverty in Philadelphia, focusing on housing, employment, medical care, and education. The organization launched the Hub of Hope in 2011 as part of a city initiative to open more spaces during the coldest winter months. The small storefront location was open January through April for a few hours each day.

Following its success, and in partnership with the City of Philadelphia, the SEPTA transit service, and a host of supporters, the Hub of Hope greatly expanded in 2018. The new facility is an 11,000 square-foot, year-round walk-in engagement center, located in a concourse space at a major, underground, Center City rail station. Individuals can enjoy a warm cup of coffee, take a shower, wash laundry, and speak to peers or case managers to begin the process of finding a permanent home. In addition to social services, the facility also offers a range of health care services including primary medical care and behavioral health care.

**~ KING COUNTY ~
WASHINGTON**

**A place of hope and
change, pursuing a vision
that all women should
have a place to call home**

The Sophia Way is an entity that assists women from homelessness to independence through the provision of crucial services, from shelter to food to professional care. Serving women throughout King County, the organization traces its origin to 2006, when a woman walked into a church, asked “Where can I sleep tonight?” and there was no answer to give. From that beginning, the organization has become a compassionate force in the region; in 2021 alone, 423 women found shelter, 20,000 beds were filled, 44,000 meals were served, and 85 women found permanent housing.

At the day center, women can shower, wash laundry, use computers, and build relationships with other members of the program. The extended-stay, overnight shelter is located at a church in Bellevue, where women are provided shelter, meals, and personal case managers. Over the past several years, members of BOMA/Seattle-King County have contributed tens of thousands of dollars, purchased and installed a large awning, and completely renovated a storage room.