

California Needs a Comprehensive Homelessness Strategy

Background: California's counties are on the front lines helping unsheltered residents access housing and other supportive services while working to provide key behavioral health services for those who qualify. However, without a comprehensive, holistic strategy, our state will never be able to effectively address our severe homelessness crisis. The current approach is fragmented and missing clear lines of responsibility and accountability for all levels of government, provides inconsistent and insufficient funding, and lacks the policy tools needed to guide efforts to functionally end homelessness.

The California State Association of Counties is eager to work with our state and local elected partners to develop the comprehensive strategy necessary to make meaningful progress in helping the unhoused. The following principles should guide our approach:

1. California needs a statewide plan.

- California needs a comprehensive, holistic statewide approach to addressing our severe homelessness crises.
- The current approach is fragmented and missing clear lines of responsibility and accountability for all levels of government, provides inconsistent and insufficient funding, and requires additional policy tools to guide efforts to functionally end homelessness.
- Addressing homelessness requires coordination across numerous policy areas that impact efforts to build housing, serve individuals in need, and prevent vulnerable populations from becoming homeless.
- We need a statewide plan that pulls together all aspects and all levels of government, with clear metrics and accountability for purposeful results.

2. A working partnership between the state, counties and cities must be established with clear responsibilities and accountability.

- No one level of government is solely responsible for the homelessness crisis. The undertow of massive economic and systemic inequities, as well as a tangled web of decisions made by past leaders, continue to stymie efforts to support those in crisis and create real housing solutions.
- Meaningful progress to reduce homelessness is only achievable through development of a comprehensive system – from shelter and housing to services and rehabilitation – that recognizes the integral role of all state and local governments working as partners.
- The working partnership must align all levels of government with clear responsibilities, accountability, supportive policy changes, robust technical assistance, and flexible funding to meet the unique needs of our diverse communities.

3. California needs an all-inclusive plan to build enough temporary and permanent housing with measurable outcomes, clear responsibility and funding.

- We need a plan that involves all levels of government to build an adequate housing continuum accessible to all Californians.
- Decades of underfunding and unmet affordable housing production needs cannot be solved with one-time investments.
- Project RoomKey and HomeKey are successful pilot programs, but we need long-term, sustainable policies and funding that encourage housing and shelter production and operation in every community, especially near where most unsheltered residents live.
- Housing and shelter efforts must align with existing community infrastructure and be prioritized in areas where food, transportation, medical care, and other services are most accessible to unsheltered residents.

4. Long-term, sustainable, and equitable state investments are necessary to ensure critical treatment and supportive services.

- Governor Newsom and the Legislature are to be commended for providing more funding to address homelessness than has previously occurred in California.
- To continue progress, local governments need sustainable, long-term and flexible funding to develop housing options and help those at risk of homelessness to remain housed, as well as provide the wraparound services required to help the unhoused and individuals living with a mental illness and/or substance use disorders.
- The complexity of homelessness requires equitable statewide funding for key existing services such as Public Guardians, Assisted Outpatient Treatment, and Peer Support Specialists. Currently, these critical services are funded only to the extent that a county can afford to do so without sacrificing other community behavioral health services.
- We also need sustainable funding for ongoing operating costs, outreach and engagement efforts – which are the only evidence-based methods known to help transition people from the streets into care – and the flexibility to apply funding to address unique local needs without resource- and time-intensive application requirements.
- Sustained state funding, paired with flexibility at the local level, requires robust technical assistance and strong accountability provisions to ensure all levels of government meet clear outcomes and measurable goals when utilizing public funding.

California's 58 counties seek to engage the Governor, Legislature, cities, community partners and those who are living without shelter to forge these critical building blocks and investments together. We must develop the comprehensive strategy necessary to make meaningful progress in helping the unhoused.