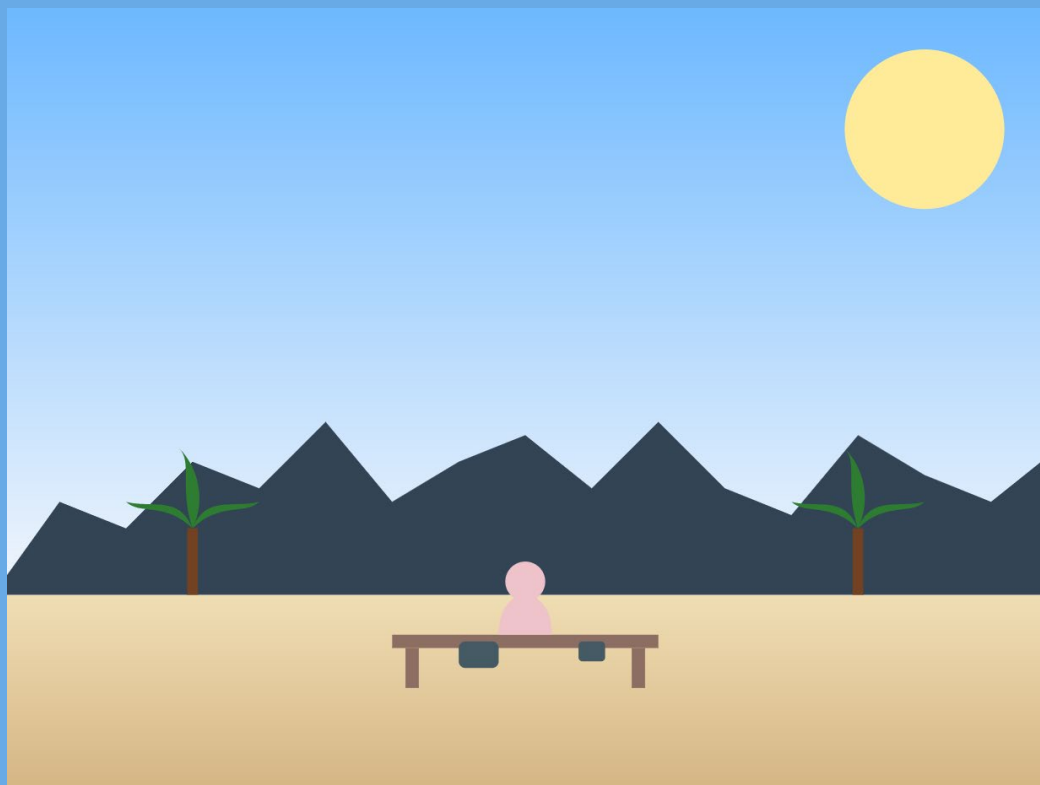


2024-2025 ORANGE COUNTY GRAND JURY REPORT



Grand Jury

Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?

Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?

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ACRONYMS

2-1-1 OC	2-1-1 Orange County
AHA	Anaheim Housing Authority
BOS	County of Orange Board of Supervisors
CES	Coordinated Entry System
CoC	Orange County Continuum of Care
ERAP	Emergency Rental Assistance Program
GGHA	Garden Grove Housing Authority
HEAP	Homeless Emergency Aid Program
HMIS	Homeless Management Information System
HPSP	Homeless Prevention and Stabilization Program
HUD	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
OCC	Office of Care Coordination
OCHA	Orange County Housing Authority
OCHFT	Orange County Housing Finance Trust
PIT	Point in Time Count
PSH	Permanent Supportive Housing
RRH	Rapid Re-housing
SAHA	Santa Ana Housing Authority
SPA	Service Planning Area

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SUMMARY

Homelessness in Orange County has been a persistent and growing issue for years. Despite substantial spending, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness continues to rise. The crisis remains both visible and worsening. The most rapidly expanding homeless and at-risk-of-becoming homeless populations are the elderly and those on fixed incomes, who are vulnerable to rising rents and other economic trends.

Approaches to this issue vary. Advocates for prevention prioritize rental assistance, housing retention, and early intervention. However, in Orange County, the focus is on more costly and reactive responses. These include expanding shelters, increasing access to temporary and transitional housing, mental health and substance use disorder services, legal support, and employment and vocational training programs to help individuals regain stability.

The reactive approach dominates because it is easier to measure. However, the Grand Jury determined that without a decisive shift toward prevention—addressing root causes before homelessness occurs—lasting progress in this area will remain out of reach. Prevention is not just a strategy; it is the foundation for any sustainable solution. Preventing homelessness before it begins spares individuals and families the trauma of displacement and offers a more humane, cost-effective path forward.

The Grand Jury acknowledges that any program to aid the homeless population is contingent on the ongoing financial support of the federal and State governments. As of the writing of this report, this funding is at risk of being reduced or eliminated.

BACKGROUND

To live without a home is to lack the foundation upon which many other opportunities are built, including healthcare, education, employment, and personal safety. Homelessness does not have a single cause; it stems from complex, interconnected factors, including economic hardship, mental health struggles, domestic violence, systemic inequalities, and the high cost of housing.

The pathways out of homelessness are equally multifaceted, requiring coordinated efforts across housing, healthcare, behavioral health, employment, and community-based services. In the view of this Grand Jury, it is unacceptable that in a region as resource rich as Orange County, thousands of individuals, including children, veterans, and seniors, are forced to tolerate harsh or horrific conditions when they end up homeless.

Even with substantial investment, homelessness remains a constant social challenge for Orange County. The Grand Jury contends that the County must move beyond reactive measures toward

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sustained, integrated solutions that ensure all people have the same opportunities for a safe and stable place to call home.

A key element of contemporary homelessness response is the Point-in-Time (PIT) count, a nationwide initiative mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The PIT count is usually conducted every other year and counts the number of individuals unsheltered¹ and sheltered² in a single night.

Originating in January 2005 as part of HUD's Continuum of Care (CoC) Program, this data collection effort is essential for federal funding and system planning. Prior to its standardization, data on homelessness was sporadic and inconsistent, clearly underestimating the scale of the issue. Today, the PIT count is a critical tool for tracking trends, planning services, and guiding public investment. Critics of this count have claimed significant undercounting of the homeless population; however, it remains the federally mandated approach in order to receive HUD funding.

Service Planning Areas

Following a 2016 assessment of homeless services in the County, which called for more coordinated resource distribution and service delivery across different geographic areas, Orange County divided its homeless services system into three Service Planning Areas (SPA): North, Central, and South. These SPAs aligned with the County's efforts to comply with legal mandates in place at the time, including the Ninth Circuit's holding in *Martin v. City of Boise*, 902 F. 3d 584 (2019), where the court found that it was unconstitutional to enforce anti-camping ordinances without providing shelter options.³ It further allowed for shared shelter capacities, coordinated outreach, and supportive services that respected individuals' rights. The framework became integral to the County's homelessness strategy.

¹ People are considered unsheltered if they are living in places not meant for human habitation, such as streets or sidewalks, cars or other vehicles, abandoned buildings, parks, bus or train stations, and campgrounds not designated for long-term stays. These individuals were not accessing any formal shelter services on the night of the count.

² People are considered sheltered if they are staying in Emergency Shelters, Transitional Housing and Safe Havens. These individuals are in facilities that provide temporary housing and are typically supported by public or nonprofit organizations.

³ This ruling has since been abrogated by the U.S. Supreme Court in *City of Grants Pass, Or., v. Johnson*, 603 U.S. 520 (2024) (holding that city ordinances prohibiting camping did not constitute cruel and unusual punishment when applied to individuals experiencing homelessness, even if homelessness was involuntary).

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Table 1: Orange County Homelessness: Point-in-Time County Summary (2019-2024)

<u>SPA</u>	<u>2019 Total</u>	<u>2022 Total</u>	<u>2024 Total</u>
North SPA	2,765	2,419	3,227
Central SPA	3,193	2,538	3,454
South SPA	763	585	641
TOTALS	6,721	5,542	7,322

After the decline in 2022, Orange County saw an increase in 2024, with the homeless population rising by 32%. Although millions of dollars have been invested in housing, shelters, and services, thousands of individuals and families remain unhoused, highlighting both the scale of the problem and the need for more effective, coordinated approaches.

Unique Challenges Presented in Orange County

Orange County is a place of affluence and opportunity, but it is also a region of profound contrasts. With its beautiful shoreline, highly rated schools, and strong economic activity, it attracts global investment and high-income earners. It is also one of the most *unaffordable* housing markets in the nation.

The average rent for a one-bedroom unit in Orange County is between \$2,200 to well above \$2,500 per month, far beyond the means of minimum wage or even many middle-income workers. In addition to rent cost, a persistently tight housing market with vacancy rates between 3% and 5% has contributed to even higher prices.⁴ Even more telling is that in Orange County, a one-person household is considered low income if their earnings do not exceed \$94,750. For a four-person household, that number is \$135,350.⁵

In addition, Orange County has a severe shortage of affordable rental units. Unlike urban centers where services are more concentrated, Orange County's suburban sprawl, limited public transportation, and car-dependent infrastructure make it even more difficult for unsheltered households⁶ to get the help they need, even when it exists.

⁴ "2024-2025 Community Indicators Report - Orange County Business Council (OCBC)." Orange County Business Council (OCBC) - The Home of Orange County, November 22, 2024. <https://ocbc.org/2024-2025-community-indicators-report/>.

⁵ City of Irvine, Website "Will I qualify for Affordable Housing? City of Irvine"

⁶ "Household" refers to individuals or groups at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

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Together, these factors make homelessness in Orange County a harsh reality. Experiencing and escaping homelessness present a major challenge. Those already experiencing homelessness as well as those at risk of homelessness face a housing market that offers little relief and even fewer realistic pathways to acquiring housing.

As Orange County continues to respond to the growing crisis of homelessness, most of its infrastructure and investment funding focus on reactive strategies such as emergency shelters, street outreach, and encampment eradication.

REASON FOR THE STUDY

The Grand Jury sought to determine best practice strategies for *both* decreasing and preventing homelessness, and what myths and facts are associated with that condition. Dispelling the myths about homelessness is important to understanding the problem. When communities and policy makers operate on false narratives, they divert valuable resources from proven strategies like prevention, affordable housing, and supportive services. Correcting these misconceptions is not just a matter of public education, it is a necessary step toward real, sustainable progress.

In addition, the Grand Jury looked at the agencies in the County dedicated to addressing homelessness and sought to determine whether Orange County is moving in the right direction towards reducing it.

From its research and investigation, the Grand Jury identified the following myths and facts:

Myth 1: Homeless people do not want to work.

Fact: Many people experiencing homelessness have jobs. However, low wages, high rents, and job instability make it difficult for them to afford housing. The California Housing Partnership, a non-profit that provides technical assistance and policy leadership at the state and national level to increase the supply of affordable homes in California, noted that in May 2025, renters in Orange County needed to earn \$54.94 per hour, or 3.3 times the State minimum wage, to afford the then-monthly average rent of \$2,857. More recently, it noted that more than three out of four extremely low-income households paid more than 50% of their income on rent.

Additionally, some people experiencing homelessness struggle with a lack of adequate transportation and childcare, and/or vulnerable legal status, which further complicate their ability to maintain stable employment and housing.

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Myth 2: Homelessness is a choice.

Fact: The Grand Jury’s study revealed that most people want to be housed. Many people experiencing homelessness are forced into it by circumstances such as job loss, sudden medical crises, domestic violence, and/or lack of affordable housing.

Myth 3: Mental illness and/or substance use disorder cause homelessness.

Fact: While mental illness and substance use do affect some people experiencing homelessness, these are not necessarily the primary causes. The evidence reveals that many people experiencing homelessness develop drug and alcohol problems as well as worsening mental health *after* they become homeless.⁷

Myth 4: Homelessness primarily affects single men.

Fact: Homelessness affects a diverse range of people, including families, single mothers, veterans, and the fastest growing group, elderly individuals, who, at the time of this writing, make up the largest portion of the homeless population.

Myth 5: Providing shelters and comprehensive wraparound services (programs that address multiple needs, including housing, healthcare, mental health support, employment assistance, and social services) encourages people to remain homeless.

Fact: Research and current literature show that access to shelters, food, and mental and physical healthcare helps people stabilize and transition to permanent housing. The “Housing First” approach, which prioritizes providing housing to people experiencing homelessness without preconditions such as sobriety or employment, has been proven to reduce homelessness rather than increase it.⁸

Myth 6: Homeless people are dangerous and/or criminals.

Fact: Studies show that individuals experiencing homelessness are far more likely to be victims of crime rather than perpetrators. Homeless people, particularly women, face higher risks of violence, theft, rape, and exploitation.⁹

⁷ “Behavioral Health and Homelessness | Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative.” 2025. Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative. March 19, 2025.

⁸ Peng, Yinan, Robert A. Hahn, Ramona K. C. Finnie, Jamaica Cobb, Samantha P. Williams, Jonathan E. Fielding, Robert L. Johnson, et al. 2020. “Permanent Supportive Housing with Housing First to Reduce Homelessness and Promote Health among Homeless Populations with Disability: A Community Guide Systematic Review.” *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 26 (5): 404–11.

⁹ “Behavioral Health and Homelessness | Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative.”

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Myth 7: All homeless people live on the streets.

Fact: Many people experiencing homelessness reside in shelters, motels, hotels, or in their vehicles. Others temporarily “couch surf” with friends or family. Despite these arrangements, they still lack stable housing.

Myth 8: Homelessness is a "big city" problem.

Fact: Homelessness exists in every community, including suburbs and rural areas. The issue may be less visible in smaller communities, but it is present everywhere.

Myth 9: If a homeless person needed assistance, they could go to a shelter.

Fact: Many shelters have long waitlists, strict rules, and limited space. Some shelters do not permit pets, couples, families, or individuals with certain health conditions, leaving many without viable options.

Myth 10: Homeless people move to California, drawn by its mild climate and perceived abundance of resources.

Fact: A recent large-scale [survey of unhoused Californians](#) conducted by the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, one of the largest reference studies of homelessness in California, found 90% of participants were from California (meaning they lived in California when they became homeless) and 75% lived in the same county where they were last housed. Most people become homeless in the communities where they reside. Most prefer to remain in the communities they are familiar with.

The Cost of Homelessness

Research reveals that once a person or family is rendered homeless, the cost to the County, its thirty-four municipalities, and its non-governmental service agencies (including hospitals and nonprofits for addressing mental and physical needs) rises dramatically. The cost of serving people experiencing homelessness varies depending on whether they are living on the streets, in shelters, or in alternative forms of housing. The Grand Jury found that it is ultimately less costly and more effective to keep people in their current homes than to try to get them back into housing after they have experienced the instability, trauma, and danger of being without a home.

While evaluating the financial impact of homelessness, it is important to consider the wide range of services and resources utilized. These include emergency and long-term support systems, which contribute significantly to public and private expenditures. The following are key cost factors:

- Soup kitchens – Providing daily meals to individuals experiencing food insecurity

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- Food pantries – Distributing groceries and essential food items
- Substance use disorder services – Treatment and rehabilitation programs for addiction
- Emergency room services – Immediate medical care often used as primary healthcare
- Inpatient hospital stays – Extended medical treatment for acute and chronic conditions
- Mental Health Services – Counseling, psychiatric care, and crisis intervention
- Other related health services – Dental, vision, and preventive care
- Policing – Law enforcement interactions related to homelessness
- Nights in jail – Incarceration costs for individuals experiencing homelessness

A 2024 report on homelessness prepared by the United Way of Orange County (United Way) revealed that the average cost of maintaining a chronically homeless person living in a place *not* meant for human habitation, such as tents, sidewalks, parks, beaches or vehicles, for at least one year, was \$100,759. The estimated average annual cost of services per capita for Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) clients is approximately 50% lower than for the chronically homeless person living on the street, or \$51,587, even taking into consideration the program costs of PSH.

The Grand Jury was unable to definitively establish what it would cost annually to keep a household at risk of homelessness in their home through preventive measures. However, existing figures suggest that it is less expensive to keep someone housed than to provide them with shelter and other services after they have become unhoused. For example, the annual cost for those housed through Rapid Rehousing¹⁰ is \$9,175¹¹ and for those in Bridge Housing¹² it is \$22,686.¹³

Prevention

While the Grand Jury believes that prevention is the most cost-effective strategy for dealing with homelessness, at present, there are limited ways to consistently and correctly identify at-risk

¹⁰ Rapid Rehousing is a model designed to provide temporary housing assistance to people experiencing homelessness, moving them quickly into permanent housing.

¹¹ United To End Homelessness, accessed June 17, 2025, <https://unitedtoendhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Orange-County-Cost-Study-Homeless-Executive-Summary.pdf>.

¹² Bridge Housing is a short-term emergency shelter or transitional housing model designed to quickly connect individuals to Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). The term is commonly used by providers prioritizing rapid transitions to stable housing.

¹³ United to End Homelessness.

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households. It is easier to “measure” or “see” when one is homeless rather than calculating when one is at risk of becoming homeless.

The metrics of providing housing are easier to track, and they justify receiving funding from federal, State, and private sources. It is difficult to show something that did *not* happen, and then justify it in a budget. For example, HUD allocates significant funding to assist those already experiencing homelessness, but it invests comparatively limited funding in preventative measures aimed at those at risk for losing their current housing.

Nonetheless, the current lack of metrics and other difficulties in identifying at-risk households is not a valid reason for declining to work on prevention. The concept of prevention has not only saved lives but has improved the quality of life. Vaccinations and wearing seatbelts are only two of many examples of the value of prevention.

The need to prevent homelessness in Orange County before it occurs represents what this Grand Jury believes to be a vital issue ripe for further study, as the number of people experiencing homelessness countywide continues to rise.

METHOD OF STUDY

This study employed a mixed-method research approach to provide analysis of current responses to homelessness in Orange County. The objective was to develop informed, practical findings and recommendations to address the complex causes, consequences, and challenges of being homeless, and most importantly, to prevent homelessness in the County.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research Approach

The Grand Jury performed structured in-depth interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders. Many were interviewed multiple times to ensure the validity of the data and information used to construct this report. Interviewees included city and County officials, nonprofit leaders, law enforcement representatives, healthcare providers, outreach workers, and individuals with the lived experience of homelessness. This included persons currently experiencing homelessness and those who have successfully transitioned into stable housing.

Field research included site visits to various shelter facilities operated by both public agencies and non-profit organizations, as well as several specialty shelters that focus on women, elderly, veterans, and disabled people. These visits allowed for the direct observation of critical wraparound services. Interactions with facility staff and residents yielded firsthand insight into program challenges and successes.

In parallel with qualitative efforts, the study incorporated quantitative data derived from public sources, including the past three Point-in-Time (PIT) count statistics, current Homeless

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Management Information System (HMIS) data, and regional Continuum of Care reports. The Grand Jury also reviewed the Orange County Evictions, Spring 2023 Report published by the United Way and St. Joseph Community Partnership Fund. This data and current information were analyzed to identify demographic trends and patterns of service.

Documents, Literature Review, and Tasks

The Grand Jury reviewed primary and secondary source documents. This included

- City and County homelessness strategic plans
- Program evaluations and financial audits
- Legislative and judicial documents, including *Martin v. City of Boise*, 902 F. 3d 584 (2019), which held that it was unconstitutional to enforce anti-camping ordinances without providing shelter options, and the U.S. Supreme Court opinion in *City of Grants Pass, Or. v. Johnson*, 603 U.S. 520 (2024), which gave cities broader authority to enforce anti-camping laws, significantly impacting how homelessness is addressed across the United States
- Prior Grand Jury reports
- Funding allocation reports and service provider documentation

This Grand Jury attended United Way’s Homelessness 101 program, a monthly educational initiative designed to dispel common myths, provide up-to-date statistics and research, explain the root causes, and share best practices for addressing homelessness.

The Grand Jury reviewed existing literature, including peer-reviewed studies, policy white papers, and best-practices guidelines from national and regional sources. This review highlighted widely recognized, evidence-based interventions such as Housing First, the Coordinated Entry System (CES), Permanent Supportive Housing, and Harm Reduction Models. It synthesized data from all sources to identify gaps in service delivery, limitations in resource allocation, and opportunities for policy and program improvement.

INVESTIGATION

The Grand Jury learned that all entities involved in addressing homelessness are making commendable efforts. However, current strategies remain insufficient, as the number of households experiencing homelessness continues to rise. The Cities of Santa Ana, Anaheim, and Garden Grove have their own housing authorities, which has improved their ability to address homeless issues more expediently. Smaller cities lack the same resources and infrastructure and struggle to provide similar services.

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Through interviews, site visits, and a review of multiple city websites, the Grand Jury learned that most cities continue to prioritize reactive measures, with limited attention given to meaningful prevention strategies, underscoring the need for a stronger, more deliberate focus on preventing homelessness.

Some cities claim they cannot provide affordable housing because they are “built out.” The Grand Jury determined that this is not accurate. Santa Ana, one of the densest cities in the nation, has made positive strides in constructing new housing units. Additionally, over the past three years, Irvine has made notable progress in expanding its affordable housing stock. Unfortunately, other cities lag behind.

The Ultimate Problem

The most significant issue identified in this study is the excessive cost of housing in Orange County. Housing expenses are estimated to be 74% above the national average,¹⁴ making it prohibitively expensive to develop, purchase and maintain affordable housing units. This economic barrier restricts the reach of Housing-First¹⁵ strategies and slows progress toward sustainable reduction in homelessness. Rents continue to climb, while wages for disabled, elderly, and many other workers remain stagnant. This widens the gap between income and housing costs and pushes more households to the brink of homelessness.

The Orange County 2025 Affordable Housing Needs Report from the California Housing Partnership, published in May 2025, further illustrated these issues with several key findings:

- 121,434 low-income renter households in Orange County do not have access to an affordable home.
- State and federal funding for housing production and preservation in Orange County is \$249 million, a 50% increase from the year prior.
- 81% of extremely low-income households in Orange County are paying more than half of their income on housing costs, compared to 3% of moderate-income households.
- In 2024 there were only 4,679 beds available in the interim housing supply in Orange County for persons experiencing homelessness.

¹⁴ US Census 2023 Median selected monthly owner costs w mortgage & Median Gross Rent. Orange County vs. National Average.

¹⁵ Housing First is a 2016 CA State mandate prioritizing basic necessities like food and a place to live without preconditions, e.g. sobriety. This model is in contrast to the Treatment Model, which prioritizes treatment and compliance before housing.

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- Asking rents in Orange County increased by 27.1% (\$609) between Q4 2019 and Q4 2024.

Solving California's affordable housing crisis requires a long-term, comprehensive, evidence-based set of policies and solutions, like those described in the Roadmap Home 2030 (www.roadmaphome2030.org), a plan for "ending homelessness" that includes developing affordable housing and protecting low-income renters by allowing them to remain in their homes. By pairing clear goals with policy and systemic strategies that can yield lasting impact, the investments made today will bring about the outcome many Californians have been longing for, especially in Orange County, where the problem is increasing.

The underfunding of preventive homelessness interventions indicates that the County is generally focused on reactive strategies. It allocates relatively few dollars to programs that could prevent homelessness before it begins. This imbalance only perpetuates the cycle of displacement and trauma and leads to higher long-term costs.

Moreover, several service providers have reported that overly restrictive spending and distribution requirements, plus bureaucratic red tape, hinder their ability to serve the largest number of at-risk households in the most efficient manner.

The County's reactive strategy is not only less cost effective, it is impeded by the shortage of affordable units. Additionally, each shelter has its own admission criteria and provides a distinct array of programs and services, highlighting the diverse needs of homeless households in their pursuit of secure, permanent housing. This underscores that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. Some individuals end up going to several different shelters before they locate the one that fits their needs.

The underfunding problem is exacerbated by the possibility that State and federal funding for homelessness programs in general is at risk of being substantially reduced or eliminated.

How Orange County Deals with Homelessness

Orange County Commission to Address Homelessness

The Orange County Commission to Address Homelessness serves as a central advisory body coordinating the County's response. It was formed in conjunction with the County's Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness. This Plan was adopted in 2009 and aimed to effectively end homelessness over the subsequent decade. The Commission members consist of representatives from County and city governments, as well as members from the business sector, philanthropic organizations, community and faith-based groups, healthcare, public safety, and other key stakeholders. It operates under the guidance of the Director of Care Coordination, who sets the agenda and collaborates with Commission members to focus on regional policy and

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implementation strategies, affordable housing development, data analysis, best practices research, and social policy.

The Commission's purpose, as outlined in its bylaws, includes working with the community and interested stakeholders to promote effective responses to homelessness, and acting as an advisory body to the County Board of Supervisors (BOS) *without* independent authority on matters such as legislation, funding, or lobbying. Over time, the Commission's bylaws have been revised to better reflect evolving strategies and priorities. These revisions have included changes to the membership and the inclusion of additional stakeholders, such as the Orange County District Attorney's office, to ensure a comprehensive approach to this growing, complex issue. While an arm of the Commission is devoted to prevention, it does not appear to be a major focus of this entity.

In 2018 the BOS restricted the Commission, removing references to the Ten-Year Plan and altering its governance. The new structure granted the BOS greater control over the Commission's composition and direction, shifting its focus toward broader collaboration on other areas identified by the Office of Care Coordination.

2-1-1 Orange County

The United Way operates a 24/7 telephone referral service known as 2-1-1 OC through a contract with Orange County. They maintain a directory of programs and services. Trained operators refer those in need to one or more of the 1,000 plus service providers in Orange County. This includes referrals for housing, food, clothing, health care and counseling. To improve their services, they have recently implemented a new process to allow for follow-up and coordination with referrals. The Grand Jury has visited a number of these service entities and found them to be well run by dedicated staff. Unfortunately, many people in need are unaware of the existence of 2-1-1 OC.

Orange County Housing Finance Trust

In June 2018, the BOS approved a housing funding strategy in response to the crisis of homelessness and a shortage of Permanent Supportive Housing. It set a target for the development of 2,700 new permanent supportive housing units within six years.

The Orange County Housing Finance Trust (OCHFT) was established in 2019 as a Joint Powers Authority between the County of Orange and its cities, under the direction of the BOS, to help coordinate and oversee efforts to increase construction of affordable housing units. The OCHFT acts as a central repository for housing construction funds and supports the construction of affordable housing through resources such as voter-approved bonds, private investment, and long-term financing mechanisms such as developer fees and general funds.

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By 2025, twenty-seven of Orange County's thirty-four cities had joined the OCHFT. As of the date of this report, only 1,394 of the 2,700 projected units have been completed.

Project Homekey

Project Homekey is a statewide initiative that provides an opportunity for State, regional, and local public entities to convert various housing types to permanent housing, including but not limited to hotels, motels, hostels, single-family homes and multifamily apartments, adult residential facilities, manufactured housing, and commercial properties. As of January 2024, it has built 15,000 units in the State of California for people experiencing homelessness, with 391 units completed in Orange County.

Conceptually, this program provides an innovative way to increase much needed permanent housing. However, the program faces challenges, including extremely narrow completion time requirements that include only twelve months for rehabilitating property, and twenty-four months for completing new construction. These are unrealistic time constraints given the challenges of construction. In addition, the program is limited to properties that are available for purchase, which tend to be older real estate that has not been properly maintained.

Continuum of Care Program

The Continuum of Care Program outlines a process used by communities to apply for funding from HUD. The term "Continuum of Care" has been used many ways and can refer to the planning process, the collection of stakeholders involved in the planning process, the geographic area covered by the CoC, or the actual grant received from HUD.

HUD developed the CoC process in 1994 to coordinate the distribution of several competitive homeless assistance programs.¹⁶ It was designed to promote coordination within communities and between programs. Prior to the development of CoCs, organizations applied individually for funding from several homeless assistance programs.

A CoC gives local planning bodies the responsibility for coordinating the full range of homeless services in a "geographic area," which may cover a city, county, metropolitan area or an entire state. The goal of a CoC is to develop community plans to organize and deliver housing and services to meet the specific needs of people experiencing homelessness as they move to stable housing and maximum self-sufficiency.

¹⁶ McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11381-11389) Commonly known as the "McKinney Vento Act"; 24 CFR Part 578

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The Orange County CoC

The Orange County CoC is a comprehensive and collaborative regional Continuum of Care. It covers the County's thirty-four cities and unincorporated areas. It also includes as part of its collaboration efforts County departments and agencies, local governments, housing and supportive service providers, and community groups, including non-profits, faith-based organizations, interested business leaders, schools, individuals with lived experience of homelessness, and other stakeholders.

Under the direction of the Continuum of Care Board, the CoC is tasked with several key responsibilities:

- Prioritizing, directing, and distributing competitive HUD funding to non-profit entities and overseeing these entities. The contracts must focus on four pillars, or principles: Prevention, Outreach, Shelter, and Housing
- Overseeing the Coordinated Entry System, which coordinates intake assessment of program participants, and operating the Homeless Management Information System, (HMIS). This is a computerized database to capture client-level information on the characteristics and service needs of those experiencing homelessness.
- Engaging in system operations and planning to effectively address homelessness
- Providing a pivotal role in facilitating access to housing vouchers, particularly through partnerships with local housing authorities (See discussion below)

The Continuum of Care Board

The CoC Board ensures alignment with CoC guidelines. It governs the CoC and provides strategic direction. It is comprised of members of the various collaborative participants, as well as two at-large, non-voting members.

The Office of Care Coordination

The OCC is the agency responsible for supporting Orange County's Continuum of Care. It provides administrative services for the CoC, and administers contracts, monitors budgets, and evaluates the results of the funded programs.

Local Housing Authorities

Orange County has four housing authorities: Orange County (OCHA), Garden Grove (GGHA), Anaheim (AHA), and Santa Ana (SAHA). All four manage vital HUD-funded voucher programs that help secure stable housing. Garden Grove, Anaheim, and Santa Ana Housing Authorities operate similarly. Orange County Housing Authority serves the unincorporated area and the other thirty-one cities. Challenges persist with all the housing authorities, including long

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waitlists, limited number of vouchers, landlords who refuse to accept vouchers, and a deepening affordable housing crisis. These challenges are straining communities throughout the County.

Housing Vouchers

There are different types of housing vouchers. The Grand Jury addressed “tenant-based” vouchers, which are tied to the tenant and not the property. The tenant may use the voucher to rent a house or an apartment of their choice from the conventional market. Alternatively, a project-based voucher is tied to the property itself.

These vouchers are favored over the conventional model of developing housing—often funded through low-income housing tax credits—because they are significantly faster and more cost-effective. In California, it takes over three years to build one unit of affordable housing at costs as high as \$700,000 or more per unit,¹⁷ compared to just 100 days to house someone using a tenant-based voucher with housing navigation and landlord incentives. This approach is also at least four times less expensive.

There are several different types of tenant-based housing vouchers. They include the following:

Permanent Supportive Housing

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is a type of rental assistance provided by HUD and administered by local housing authorities. It is designed to help households experiencing homelessness or those at risk of chronic homelessness obtain and maintain stable housing. It is targeted at individuals with disabilities, chronic health conditions, or histories of homelessness, and is intended for long-term use without time limits (contingent upon compliance with lease agreements and program rules). This type of housing voucher includes supportive services and case management, mental health treatment, and employment assistance.

Housing advocates have described PSH as the “biggest homeless prevention program in the United States.” That is because this program allows those on a fixed income, such as the elderly and disabled, to remain housed.

Section 8 Housing (Housing Choice)

This tenant-based voucher is also funded by HUD and administered by local housing authorities. The public often confuses Section 8 Housing Vouchers with PSH. Permanent Supportive Housing is designed to serve households experiencing chronic homelessness who have at least one member with a chronic health condition or disability.

¹⁷ Streeter, Jialu “Homelessness in California: Causes and Policy Considerations,” Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR). May 2022. <https://siepr.stanford.edu/publications/policy-brief/homelessness-california-causes-and-policy-considerations>

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Thus, while the two often interact, they differ in substance. Section 8 vouchers provide *only* rental assistance. In many PSH programs, Section 8 vouchers are used to subsidize their housing component, but it is the requirement that the resident or family member be disabled and the inclusion of comprehensive support services, that distinguishes PSH from standard Section 8.

The CoC plays a pivotal role in facilitating access to housing vouchers, particularly through partnerships with local housing authorities. The CoC does not directly issue vouchers, but it collaborates with all four of the local housing authorities to administer voucher programs.

Currently, there are not enough vouchers to go around. Even when an applicant obtains a Section 8 voucher, they may be unable to find housing, because some landlords decline to participate. As a result, vouchers may expire before they can be used (expiration dates vary depending on the type of voucher, but recipients can request an extension in writing), forcing individuals to restart the entire process or remain homeless. This cycle not only delays transition to stable housing, but it adds to the overall strain on shelter resources and support systems.

Of importance to note—and often overlooked—is the important role that Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers play in *preventing* homelessness. These vouchers enable low-income households to remain housed by covering a substantial portion of their rent in the private market. By providing rental support before housing instability escalates into crisis, the program serves as a frontline defense against homelessness. In high-cost areas like Orange County, where affordable housing is scarce, this preventative tool is not only cost effective but essential for decreasing the inflow of households into the homeless services system.

One of the major drawbacks in this program is that there are astronomically long waiting periods to get a voucher. As of June 2025, the wait lists for two of the four housing authorities are closed to new applicants. In fact, the OC Housing Authority wait list is closed more often than it is open.¹⁸ In addition, 72% of the current population residing in County-run homeless shelters have completed all necessary steps to be eligible for housing. However, only one out of every twelve is connected to housing. This astonishing figure speaks to the need to increase housing in the County.¹⁹

¹⁸ *OC Housing Authority Opens Housing Choice Voucher Program Waiting List* (2023) Orange County. Available at: <https://www.ocgov.com/press/oc-housing-authority-opens-housing-choice-voucher-program-waiting-list> (Accessed: 17 June 2025).

¹⁹ 2024 point in time summary. Accessed June 17, 2025. <https://ceo.ocgov.com/sites/ceo/files/2024-05/2024%20PIT%20Summary%20-%20FINAL%205.16.24.pdf>.

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Rapid Rehousing

Rapid Rehousing involves a tailored package of assistance, including financial support and housing-focused services, to facilitate a swift exit from homelessness. This approach is part of a broader strategy to end homelessness and has been shown to effectively connect people to stable housing. In some cases, rapid rehousing may be used for eviction *prevention*, keeping at-risk households in their homes.

Orange County's Emerging Trend

In Orange County, while the most common approach to homelessness remains reactive, there are some encouraging signs. In January 2024, the BOS unanimously approved the Homelessness Prevention and Stabilization Pilot Program (HPSP), spearheaded by Supervisor Vicente Sarmiento. This \$3 million initiative aimed to assist approximately 200 households at risk of eviction or experiencing a housing crisis. Eligible participants, primarily low-income, could receive up to \$10,800 over a year to cover past-due rent, utility bills, and essential needs like groceries. The program also offered wraparound services, including workforce development, financial literacy education, and food access, which was administered through the County's Office of Care Coordination (OCC).

Supervisor Doug Chaffee launched his Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) in February of 2024, with the Friendly Center, a nonprofit. This \$500,000 pilot program, which is in the process of being evaluated, aimed to prevent homelessness by providing up to three months of rental assistance to families at risk of eviction. In addition to financial aid, participants received comprehensive case management services to address underlying issues contributing to housing instability. The ERAP program was designed to offer immediate relief to households facing financial hardships ensuring they remain housed. Preliminary results proved extremely promising.

Similarly, countywide programs funded through the State's Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention (HHAP) grants are beginning to prioritize early interventions and housing stabilization.

Additionally, to address the immediate needs of community members experiencing housing instability, the Samueli Foundation recently announced a \$7.5 million collaborative investment in three eviction prevention programs. Following an initial \$1.5 million investment in a pilot program, the Foundation awarded Pathways of Hope, South County Outreach, and Families Forward an additional \$2 million each in unrestricted, flexible funding, which provided renter households with lease payments to help them remain housed.

These initiatives demonstrate a trend towards focusing on financial support and case management. Although this is not a complete list of all initiatives, preliminary evidence suggests that prevention is an attainable goal.

CONCLUSION

The 2024–2025 Orange County Grand Jury's report on homelessness presents a broad but not exhaustive review of Countywide efforts to address this challenging, ongoing crisis. While it acknowledges that all involved entities, including government agencies, nonprofits, and homeless service providers, are working to reduce homelessness, their efforts are often siloed and underfunded. These factors have limited the potential for an effective, countywide strategy.

Despite strategic systems like the Continuum of Care, the number of households experiencing homelessness in Orange County continues to rise. This report demonstrates that emergency and crisis-focused responses such as shelters, rapid rehousing and encampment clearances, are not only costly but have proven largely ineffective in reducing homelessness.

While prevention strategies—affordable housing development, identification of households at risk for losing their housing, and early intervention—are more cost effective in the long run, the County's current system remains mostly reactive. Structural barriers, limited, inconsistent, or overly restrictive funding, excessive and inconsistent building restrictions, and lack of coordination across agencies, continue to hinder meaningful, sustained progress. A shift towards long-term solutions is essential to addressing the root causes of homelessness and creating lasting change. It is both fiscally and morally imperative that Orange County shift its strategic focus from reactive to preventive actions in addressing homelessness. Despite the County's substantial and clearly well-meaning investment in emergency shelters and crisis-focused interventions, these measures alone will never solve a problem that is rooted in systemic inequity and the astronomical cost of housing in Orange County.

Numerous non-profits across the County have already demonstrated—albeit on a limited scale—that preventative strategies are not only feasible, but effective. More importantly, enabling people to remain housed through preventative measures gives the most vulnerable members of society, such as the elderly and disabled and others on fixed incomes, the option of safely and humanely remaining in their homes, even if their income fails to rise.

With sufficient and sustained funding, these efforts could be expanded significantly, reducing the inflow of households into homelessness and alleviating pressure on an overburdened emergency response system. Prevention is a crucial element in reducing homelessness.

FINDINGS

In accordance with California Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.05, the 2024-2025 Grand Jury requires (or as noted, requests) responses from each agency affected by the findings presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?

Based on its investigation, “Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?” the 2024-2025 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at seven findings, as follows:

F1. Despite its efforts and substantial resources, Orange County’s current strategy for decreasing homelessness has been largely unsuccessful.

F2. Orange County’s contract with 2-1-1 Orange County provides for comprehensive information and 24/7 telephone referral service for households in need. However, its services are not well known by the population that could benefit from their assistance.

F3. Extensive waiting periods for people seeking Section 8 (Housing Choice) vouchers and lack of affordable housing in general are major contributing factors to the growing number of people experiencing homelessness and housing instability in Orange County.

F4. While Orange County directs a limited amount of resources to prevention, its programs to address homelessness are primarily reactionary, which over time is more costly than preventive interventions.

F5. The Commission to Address Homelessness has not provided the Board of Supervisors with sufficient recommendations on homelessness prevention efforts, focusing instead on reactive strategies.

F6. Tenant-based vouchers are federally funded and administered by local Housing Authorities. They are a faster and more cost-effective way to house those experiencing homelessness. These vouchers are often unavailable and insufficiently funded, leaving many people experiencing homelessness, including those who have completed all the requirements for vouchers, without housing options.

F7. Orange County’s elderly and disabled residents are an increasing segment of the homeless population. They rely heavily on tenant-based vouchers to maintain stable housing. This fixed-income population will be disproportionately affected by any reduction in funding to these programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with California Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.05, the 2024-2025 Grand Jury requires (or as noted, requests) responses from each agency affected by the recommendations presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

Based on its investigation, “Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?” the 2024-2025 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at the following four recommendations:

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R1. Orange County should prioritize prevention of homelessness rather than primarily reactive measures. This could be done by earmarking sufficient discretionary funds toward this objective. This should be accomplished by June 30, 2026, and annually thereafter. **(F1, F3, F4, F6, F7)**

R2. The Board of Supervisors should request that the Commission to Address Homelessness prepare a plan outlining current and future (next two years) prevention strategies. The Commission should submit this plan to the Board of Supervisors by December 31, 2025, and annually thereafter. **(F1, F4, F5)**

R3. The Board of Supervisors should partner with non-profit service providers in each district that are focused on preventive measures to reduce homelessness. The programs could be similar to Supervisor Chaffee's Emergency Rental Assistance Program, which partnered with the Friendly Center, a nonprofit in his district that emphasizes prevention. These partnerships should be implemented by June 30, 2026. **(F1, F4, F5)**

R4. The County should develop a contingency plan to address potential reductions in funding for homeless prevention programs, especially for the elderly and disabled populations and those on a fixed income. This plan should identify alternate funding sources, prioritize critical services, and ensure continuity of care. This plan should be created by December 31, 2025. **(F7)**

R5. Orange County should launch a comprehensive awareness campaign to inform the public about the services offered by 2-1-1 OC. This should include social media outreach, partnerships with local media, and community events. This should be accomplished by November 30, 2025, and annually thereafter. **(F2)**

RESPONSES

The following excerpts from the California Penal Code provide the requirements for public agencies to respond to the Findings and Recommendations of this Grand Jury report:

§933

*(c) No later than **90 days** after the grand jury submits a final report on the operations of any public agency subject to its reviewing authority, the **governing body of the public agency** shall comment to the presiding judge of the superior court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the governing body, and every **elected county officer or agency head** for which the grand jury has responsibility pursuant to Section 914.1 shall comment within **60 days** to the presiding judge of the superior court, with an information copy sent to the board of supervisors, on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of that county officer or agency head and any agency or agencies which that officer or agency head supervises or controls. In any city and county, the mayor shall also comment on the findings and recommendations. All these comments and reports shall forthwith be submitted to the presiding judge of the superior court who impaneled the grand jury. A copy of all responses to grand jury reports shall be placed on file with*

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the clerk of the public agency and the office of the county clerk, or the mayor when applicable, and shall remain on file in those offices. One copy shall be placed on file with the applicable grand jury final report by, and in the control of the currently impaneled grand jury, where it shall be maintained for a minimum of five years.

§933.05.

(a) For purposes of subdivision (b) of Section 933, as to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:

(1) The respondent agrees with the finding.

(2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding; in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

(b) For purposes of subdivision (b) of Section 933, as to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:

(1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.

(2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a timeframe for implementation.

(3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.

(4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

(c) However, if a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the board of supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the board of supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision-making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

(d) A grand jury may request a subject person or entity to come before the grand jury for the purpose of reading and discussing the findings of the grand jury report that relates to that person or entity to verify the accuracy of the findings prior to their release.

(e) During an investigation, the grand jury shall meet with the subject of that investigation regarding the investigation, unless the court, either on its own determination or upon request of the foreperson of the grand jury, determines that such a meeting would be detrimental.

(f) A grand jury shall provide to the affected agency a copy of the portion of the grand jury report relating to that person or entity two working days prior to its public release and after the approval of the presiding judge. No officer, agency, department, or governing body of a public agency shall disclose any contents of the report prior to the public release of the final report.

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Responses Required

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with Penal Code Section 933.05 are required from:

Findings

Orange County Board of Supervisors

F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7

Recommendations

Orange County Board of Supervisors

R1, R2, R3, R4, R5

Responses Requested

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with Penal Code Section 933.05 are requested from:

Findings

Orange County Continuum of Care

F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7

Recommendations

Orange County Continuum of Care

R1, R2, R3, R4, R5

GLOSSARY

211 OC: A non-profit operated by the Orange County United Way that offers 24/7 telephone referral services to those in need.

Be Well Orange County: (Be Well OC) A public-private partnership dedicated to transforming mental health care in Orange County by creating a coordinated system that provides comprehensive and accessible services to all residents

Bridge Housing: A short-term emergency shelter or transitional housing model designed to quickly connect individuals to Permanent Supportive Housing. The term is commonly used by providers prioritizing rapid transitions to stable housing.

Chronically Homeless: Describes a household that lives in a place not meant for human habitation, for at least one year, such as a tent, sidewalk, park, beach or vehicle.

Chronic Substance Use Disorder: Describes households with a substance use problem that is expected to be of indefinite duration and impairs the person's ability to live independently.

Commission to Address Homelessness: A collaborative board of County and city government, private foundations, advocacy groups, community organizations, and other interested stakeholders

Coordinated Entry System (CES): A system to coordinate program participant intake assessment and provision of referral

Continuum of Care (CoC): A HUD-mandated local board of individuals and organizations working together to address homelessness on a regional basis

Couch Surf: To stay with a series of different friends or relatives; sleeping somewhere temporary such as a sofa because you do not have your own place to live

Disability: A physical, mental, or emotional impairment expected to be of long duration, that substantially impedes an individual's ability to live independently

Domestic Violence: The act of family member, partner or ex-partner attempting to dominate physically or psychologically another.

Food Insecurity: Lacking secure access to a sufficient amount of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development

Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS): Computerized database to capture client-level information on the characteristics and service needs of those experiencing homelessness

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Household: Individuals or groups at risk of or experiencing homelessness

Housing First: An approach to ending homelessness that prioritizes providing stable, permanent housing as the foundation for individuals' lives, before addressing other needs like mental health or addiction treatment.

Low-Threshold Emergency Shelter: A facility offering limited shelter as a safe alternative to being homeless that also provides essential services. "Low threshold" means that individuals do not have to be drug and alcohol free, only that their behavior comply with shelter rules.

Non-Chronically Homeless: Describes an individual or family without permanent housing, who may live on the street, in a shelter, or any other unstable or non-permanent situation for less than a year.

Office of Care Coordination (OCC): County of Orange staff who provide support to the CoC Board and coordinate homeless program funds and services

Orange County Housing Finance Trust (OCHFT): Formed in 2019 as a Joint Powers Authority among the County of Orange and its cities to fund housing that serves the homeless population.

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH): A housing model designed to provide housing assistance and supportive services on a long-term basis to people experiencing homelessness. PSH requires that the client have a disability for eligibility.

Point-in-Time Count & Survey (PIT): A community-wide effort to collect information on the number and characteristics of individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

Project Homekey: A Statewide initiative that provides an opportunity for State, regional, and local public entities to develop a range of housing types

Rapid Rehousing (RRH): A housing model designed to provide temporary housing assistance to people experiencing homelessness, moving them quickly into permanent housing.

Sheltered: Households staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing or safe havens. These individuals are in facilities that provide temporary housing and are typically supported by public or nonprofit organizations.

Unsheltered: Households that live in a place not meant for human habitation such as the street, a vehicle, an abandoned building, bus or train station, etc., or who stay in a friend's or family's garage, backyard, porch, shed, or driveway.

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