

# HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE STRATEGIC PLAN

July 2024 – June 2027



# City of Santa Cruz Citywide Strategic Plan (2023 – 2028)



## Homelessness Response

Working with the County and community partners, the City moves toward positive outcomes in homelessness response, safety, and health, balancing the interests of persons who are unhoused and housed, and the business community.

The Strategic Plan aligns with the State and County's identified goals and objectives to address homelessness.

This alignment and coordination leverages current work at the State and County levels to be more efficient and effective within the City. The Strategic Plan includes the utilization of data from

community surveys, outreach to those with lived experience, and research from various sources to inform our goals and objectives.

The Strategic Plan also aligns with the 2023–28 City of Santa Cruz Citywide Strategic Plan, where Homelessness Response is listed as one of the City's seven focus areas.

- Fiscal sustainability and transparency
- Homelessness response
- Housing
- Natural and built infrastructure
- Public safety and community well-being
- Strong business communities and a vibrant downtown
- Thriving organization

**“To design effective programs and policies to address homelessness, we need to understand who is experiencing it, how they became homeless, what their experiences are, and what is preventing them from exiting homelessness.”**

University of California San Francisco Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative

# HOMELESSNESS STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS OVERVIEW

This Strategic Plan was informed by a robust community engagement program that included eight stakeholder sessions and an online community survey. Stakeholder meetings were held with people who had lived experience of homelessness, community service providers, and City staff. At each session, the previous Homelessness Response Action Plan was reviewed, and stakeholders addressed issues, strategies, and future priorities.

## Feedback from People Experiencing Homelessness

The City of Santa Cruz Homelessness Response Team conducted surveys and focus groups in November and December 2023 with individuals who are sheltered in City-funded programs and unsheltered individuals in encampments.

### Priorities for People Experiencing Homelessness

- Expand shelter capacity with a diversity of low-barrier shelter programs. Examples include sober living environments, tiny homes, indoor shelters, and women-only options.
- More day services to meet basic needs
- Increased access to hygiene and health services
- Access to training and classes, including financial literacy, job training, and legal support
- More assistance navigating the complex network of regional social services (access to care coordination, case management, housing navigation, and more)

## Feedback from the Community

The Spring 2024 survey asked community members to provide feedback on the City's current homelessness response actions. 690 community members completed the survey. Survey results reflect a recognition of the complex relationships between social, economic, and environmental factors and a desire for a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that prioritizes immediate needs and long-term solutions.

### Priorities for Community Members

- Accessible parks and open space
- Citizen safety
- Business and economic concerns
- Humanitarian concerns
- Environmental concerns
- Equitable enforcement of the law
- Community well-being and quality of life
- Clean neighborhoods and streets
- Affordable housing and housing solutions
- Service provision and support for the unhoused

## Feedback from Service Providers

The City's Homelessness Response Team held a focus group with local service providers to solicit their input on strengths, weaknesses, and gaps related to homeless services within the City.

### Priorities for Service Providers

- Expand shelter capacity with a diversity of shelter programs
- Improve coordination between City departments and community-based services when resolving encampments
- Increase the number of case managers in the region
- More supportive housing (sober living environments and recuperative care)
- Assistance with collaboration across regional service providers (case coordination meetings, shared trainings, and more)

## Feedback from City Staff

The City's Homeless Response Team held a workshop with internal City departments, including the City Attorney's Office, Police, Fire, Planning, Economic Development, Parks & Recreation, Library, Human Resources, Water, and Public Works.

### Priorities for City Staff

- Staff Safety
- More permanent supportive housing
- Expand shelter capacity with a diversity of shelter programs
- Continue collaboration across City departments
- Increase collaboration with the County
- Increase the number of case managers, housing navigation, and outreach staff
- Ongoing community education about the City's homelessness response efforts

## 2022 -2023 Accomplishments





# Homelessness: A Crisis at All Levels

## Homelessness at the National Level

Homelessness continues to be an urgent, life-and-death public health crisis across the nation. Homelessness rose 12% nationally from January 2022 to January 2023. The rise was seen across all subgroups — families, older Americans, Veterans, youth, and young adults — and was driven by:

- Rising housing costs and a dire shortage of deeply affordable housing units
- End of pandemic-era resources and protections
- Lack of Congressional support for adequate funding to address the crisis
- Large numbers of recently arrived asylum seekers and other immigrants living in shelters and on the streets

Source: United States Interagency Council on Homelessness *Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2023*

## Homelessness is Deadly

People who experience homelessness die nearly 30 years earlier than the average American and die at the average age Americans died in the year 1900.

55 years old

77 years old



People who experience homelessness



Average American

Source: United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.  
<https://www.usich.gov/guidance-reports-data/data-trends#homelessnessff>

# Homelessness in California

A comprehensive study on homelessness conducted in June 2023 by the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative found that the majority of adults in California who experience homelessness are:

- Single
- Over 25, with nearly half over 50
- Homeless in the community where they were last housed
- Reporting significant trauma in their lives
- Reporting high levels of mental health distress and substance abuse

Reasons people became homeless:

- Losing their housing (more than half were previously renters)
- Living in poverty
- One in five enter homelessness from an institutional setting

Nearly all of the study's participants stated that housing costs posed the most significant barrier to regaining housing. Other barriers include:

- Lack of help from a case manager
- Finances
- Logistical barriers such as no phone, transportation, or documents
- Criminal justice involvement
- Poor credit

*The California Homeless Housing Needs Assessment* (December 2022) concluded that California could solve homelessness through investments of \$8.1 billion in housing, shelter, and supportive services every year for the next 12 years. This is equivalent to 2.7% of the state budget.

The California Interagency Council on Homelessness's *Action Plan for Preventing and Ending Homelessness in California* (September 2022) focuses on prevention and ultimately ending homelessness in California.

Action areas:

- Strengthening our system to better prevent and end homelessness
- Equitably addressing the health, safety, and services needs of Californians experiencing homelessness
- Expanding communities' capacity to provide safe and effective shelter and interim housing.
- Expanding and ensuring equitable access to permanent housing in our communities
- Preventing Californians from experiencing the crisis of homelessness

**California has the most people experiencing homelessness of any state in America.**

Source: Department of Housing & Urban Development, *Annual Homeless Assessment Report*, March 2022

Source: *Towards a New Understanding: The California Statewide Study on People Experiencing Homelessness*, UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, June 2023

On any given night in California, more than 161,000 people experience homelessness – this equals 25% of all Americans who are homeless.

California Interagency Council on Homelessness Action Plan for Preventing and Ending Homelessness in California, September 2022.

## Santa Cruz County: Housing for Health Partnership

Collaboration at a regional level is essential if we are to be successful in reducing homelessness in our communities. The Housing for Health Partnership (H4HP) is the federally designated continuum of care (CoC) entity for Santa Cruz County. H4HP coordinates resources, programs, and services that move us forward in preventing and ending homelessness in the region.

H4HP is a collaborative body that includes the County; the cities of Santa Cruz, Capitola, Watsonville, and Scotts Valley; housing and service providers; people with lived experience of homelessness; and other relevant stakeholders.

In the past year, H4HP received and distributed approximately \$6.0 million in federal Housing and Urban Development funding, over \$5.0 million in homeless housing assistance, prevention funding from the State of California, and other one-time grant funds.

In April 2024, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors approved the *2024-27 Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz, A Strategic Framework for Addressing Homelessness in Santa Cruz County*. This strategic framework identifies four high-level strategic objectives:

- Build a coalition
- Prevent homelessness
- Increase connections
- Increase housing affordability

The Countywide strategic framework includes four core goals:

- Reduce the length of time people experience homelessness
- Reduce the percentage of people returning to homelessness
- Ensure our local data captures information on program outcomes and community needs
- Coordinate outreach and access to services across the region.

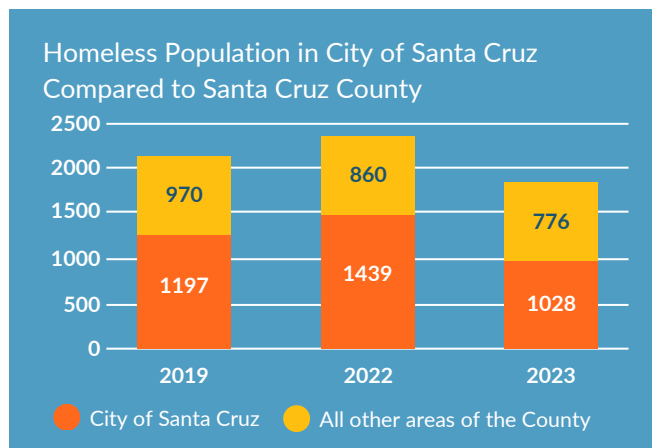
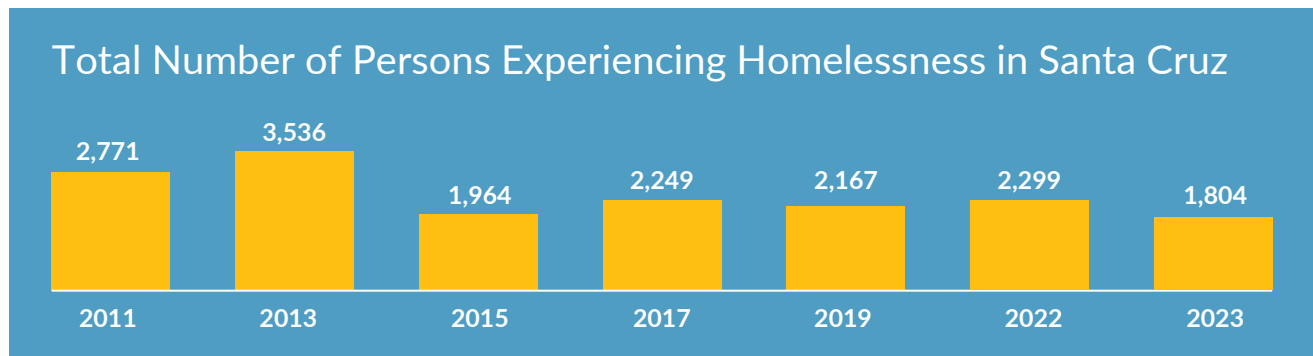
Source: Santa Cruz County Housing for Health Partnership



# Homelessness in the City of Santa Cruz

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the City of Santa Cruz was named one of the least affordable places to live in the United States in 2023. The necessary “housing wage” for a two-bedroom rental in Santa Cruz is \$63.33 per hour, compared to the national 2023 housing wage of \$28.58 per hour for a modest two-bedroom rental home. Research shows that communities can expect a more rapid increase in homelessness when people spend more than 32% of their income on rent.

Every two years, typically on a day in January, communities across the country conduct a comprehensive point in time (PIT) count of local homeless populations to measure the prevalence of homelessness. The 2023 Santa Cruz County PIT count shows a decline in persons experiencing homelessness by 21% County-wide and 29% Citywide.



## City of Santa Cruz

The City of Santa Cruz has the highest percentage of the homeless population in the County – 57% of the homeless population lives in the City of Santa Cruz. In the 2023 PIT count, there was a 29% drop in persons experiencing homelessness in the City of Santa Cruz.



# 2023 Survey on Homelessness in Santa Cruz

In the weeks that follow the street count, a more comprehensive survey of sheltered and unsheltered individuals is conducted to obtain more detailed information.

## Causes of Homelessness in Santa Cruz

Survey results revealed that the primary causes of homelessness in our community are **job loss** followed by **substance use**.

The majority of homeless in the County are

- White (81%)
- Male (71%)
- Over 25 years old (65%)

75% of unsheltered survey respondents indicated they had lived in Santa Cruz County before losing their housing.



Source: 2023 Point in Time Count Survey

## Support Needed to Secure Permanent Housing

When asked what kind of support respondents needed to obtain permanent housing, rental assistance was the most common (77%) answer. 60% reported that an increase in the availability of affordable housing would support their ability to obtain permanent housing.

## Federal, State, and Local Partnerships


The City of Santa Cruz cannot solve homelessness alone. We need partners at the County level to provide much needed mental, behavioral, or physical health services. Cities are not responsible for these types of health and human services.

In recent years, cities across the country have had to develop and implement programs and services to address the growing crisis of homelessness in our communities. Temporary shelter is crucial to address the immediate needs of people living in our parks, open spaces, doorways, and streets. While we make progress on building permanent supportive housing, people need shelter now.

The City is one piece of the puzzle to solve homelessness. To eliminate homelessness, ongoing collaboration with state and federal governments is needed to achieve stable, longer-term funding.

# City of Santa Cruz History of Homelessness Response

Over the past seven years, the City has taken the following actions regarding homelessness response: In addition, the City fostered partnerships with local service providers, such as Downtown Outreach Workers (1994) and the Homeless Outreach, Proactive Engagement and Services (HOPES) program (2014).

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- 2018**
    - The first City-funded emergency shelter opens at 1220 River Street
  - 2019**
    - The Community Advisory Committee on Homelessness established to support City policy on homelessness response.
  - 2020**
    - City hires first Homeless Response Manager.
  - 2021**
    - City adopts ordinances for oversized vehicles and camping services and standards.
    - City receives a \$14 million grant for homelessness response from the State of California and combines this with \$4 million from ARPA.
  - 2022**
    - City creates Homelessness Response Division and first three-year Homelessness Response Action Plan.
    - City hires first Homeless Response Field Crew Team, including Outreach Specialists.
    - Police Department assigns two dedicated Community Service Officers to the team.
    - City opens a 135-person shelter called the City Overlook at the Armory.
    - City opens 1220 River Street Transitional Community Camp.
    - City opens long-term, overnight-only, and emergency safe parking programs.
  - 2023**
    - City hires a legislative lobby firm to advocate for state and federal funding.
    - City receives the Pro-Housing Designation from the state in recognition of the City's efforts to build affordable housing and meet the state Regional Housing Needs Allocation.
  - 2024**
    - City dedicates \$9.6 million from the general fund to homelessness response programs.
    - City Council adopts three-year Homelessness Response Strategic Plan.
    - City receives \$4.0 million Encampment Resolution Grant.



# Homelessness Response Strategic Plan

## 2024 – 2027

Building on the success of the 2022 Homelessness Response Action Plan, the 2024 Homelessness Response Strategic Plan represents a significant step forward in the City's efforts to tackle homelessness.

Developed collaboratively, it includes input from nonprofit providers, staff, and community members, including individuals with lived experience. The plan is a blueprint for the City of Santa Cruz's homelessness response over the next three years.

This Strategic Plan leverages insights, data, and priorities gathered from stakeholders, the annual PIT count, current City programs, the Citywide Strategic Plan, and Santa Cruz County's *Strategic Framework for Addressing Homelessness*.

With clear policy goals and actionable strategies, the Strategic Plan aligns the work of the City with homeless service providers and Santa Cruz County's efforts.

The result is an enhanced, collaborative, and coordinated response to homelessness.

The City's values are updated to explicitly include equity as an important aspect of our work.

Our community has a substantial need for shelter, and we must all work together to focus on what matters most – compassion and care.

## OUR COMMITMENT

In Santa Cruz, our homelessness response will strive to balance individual needs with broad community impacts, spanning from prevention strategies to successful pathways to stable housing.

## VALUES

Our City's response to homelessness centers on:

Health  
Safety  
Collaboration

Equity  
Environmental Stewardship

Transparency  
Economic Vitality  
Fiscal Responsibility

# Homelessness Response Strategic Plan

## GOALS

**Decrease Homelessness:** reduce the number of people who are unsheltered and the total number of people experiencing homelessness.

**Prevent homelessness:** reduce the number of people who fall into homelessness.

**Increase affordable housing units:** meet and/or exceed RHNA goals.

**Reduce the impacts of encampments:** protect environmentally sensitive areas and ensure equitable access to parks and open spaces for everyone in the community.

**Build regional capacity and partnerships to resolve homelessness:** build strong partnerships across all sectors to leverage resources, share expertise, and effectively coordinate efforts.

## ACTION AREAS





# HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

July 2024 – June 2027

In March of 2022, the City of Santa Cruz recognized the changing landscape of homelessness response and the new role the City plays in shelter provisions.

The City Council took the important and necessary step to create the first Homelessness Response Action Plan (HRAP) to guide the City's homelessness response.

This updated Homelessness Response Strategic Plan will provide staff direction from July 2024 through June 2027. During each year of the plan, a yearly Action Plan will be created to implement the Strategic Plan based on the changing funding landscape.

The HRAP is the foundation for the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan builds off the work already accomplished and carries that work forward with more informed perspectives.

While some of the terminology has changed, and our values have been updated, the commitment has stayed the same. The Strategic Plan will guide the City through the next three years of our homelessness response.

The Strategic Plan does not promise to end homelessness in Santa Cruz. Still, it provides the community and staff with a pathway to focus on actions that fall within the City's responsibilities.

Long-term solutions demand more affordable housing and better supportive services across the County. These necessitate investments beyond what any single entity can provide.

Without sustainable funding, our current programs are at risk. As a community, we must commit to resourcing this ongoing endeavor.

Consistent, ample funding is critical, as it will transition individuals to homes, thereby enhancing the quality of life for everyone. This is about safeguarding human dignity, promoting prosperity, and preserving our environment.

# ACTION AREAS & STRATEGIES



## Building Capacity & Partnerships

An organizational response to homelessness and housing instability, including greater internal coordination and alignment of services. Expanding our community's overall capacity and effectiveness. Expanded legislative outreach and public engagement.

Maintain and expand organizational capacity and internal collaboration

Collaborate with community-based and faith-based organizations to provide effective and efficient service delivery

Work in alignment with the County to increase our effectiveness at reducing homelessness

- Create and implement an action plan documenting the progress of the Strategic Plan, identify annual funding resources, and refine the Strategic Plan as necessary.
- Continue to fund a dedicated staff for the Homelessness Response Program.
- Conduct weekly internal coordination meetings between City departments.
- Support community-based organizations (CBO's) to create more transitional employment programs, including expansion of Downtown Streets Team.
- Continue to partner with CBOs to increase available case management for people experiencing homelessness.
- Conduct quarterly meetings with our CBOs.
- Establish partnerships with faith-based organizations.
- Continue regular City-County Collaborative meetings.
- Support and utilize data to enhance effective coordination.
- Partner with the County to secure funding for emergency shelter, severe weather shelter and a navigation center.
- Formalize roles and responsibilities with the County via a MOU.

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# ACTION AREAS & STRATEGIES



## Building Capacity & Partnerships

Continue pursuing legislative action to obtain support from state and federal levels

Increase community engagement and education on the City's homelessness activities and programs

Establish sustainable funding sources

- Develop annual targeted state and federal legislative asks for policy reform and funding related to substance use disorder, mental health and homelessness response.
- Work with legislative groups (League of Cal Cities) to build a statewide coalition of municipalities for legislative changes and funding.
- Identify opportunities to influence & support legislation that aligns with Santa Cruz's homelessness strategies.
- Continue regular updates to staff, council, and community partners.
- Post and share on city channels (social media, website, email newsletters, webinars, events).
- Develop timely and relevant communications for at-risk community members and unhoused individuals to ensure they know how to access services and programs.
- Conduct an annual survey to measure awareness of city services, service gaps, experiences, and opinions.
- Continue to pursue state and federal grants to support programs, including the 2024 Encampment Resolution Grant of \$4.0 million. For that grant, implement programs and services related to the grant in partnership with Housing Matters and the County.
- Work with our County partners to secure funding for emergency shelter programs.
- Continue to commit general fund dollars to support ongoing programs.
- Assess existing programs for efficient use of funds.

# ACTION AREAS & STRATEGIES



## Affordable & Supportive Housing

Santa Cruz is a leader in proactive and innovative approaches to expanding affordable and supportive housing. Affordability and availability are two of the most significant contributors to our region's homelessness crisis. These actions will advance the City's longstanding commitment to expand housing opportunities in our community.

Retain, protect and increase the supply of housing

Increase access to housing navigation and essential services by continuing to develop a vision for the Coral Street area including a navigation center

Expand the City's capacity to identify and utilize policy changes to increase housing

Increase homelessness prevention efforts

- Support the development of affordable housing projects.
- Identify ongoing funding for supportive housing projects.
  
- Issue an RFP to identify and contract with a design firm.
- Work with the County departments to develop the project.
- Apply for grant funding to develop the project.
  
- Evaluate and enact local housing policies to promote housing development, particularly additional low and very-low income housing.
- Advocate state & federal legislation for housing funding.
- Monitor state legislation and take positions on bills to further housing production statewide.
  
- Obtain funding to support local eviction prevention, rental assistance, legal assistance, and tenant education.
- Support efforts for housing stabilization.
- Support the development of affordable housing projects.



# ACTION AREAS & STRATEGIES



## Environmental Stewardship

Protect our environment by reducing the impacts of illegal disposal of trash & debris. Address community impacts and neighborhood concerns from illegal encampments.

Address community impacts and neighborhood concerns from encampments and litter

Reduce illegal dumping of hazardous waste & debris

Wildfire and flood protection

- Resolve encampments quickly as shelter space allows.
- Employ contractors to provide services for refuse removal and restoration.
- Quickly remove abandoned refuse to mitigate the potential for environmental damage.
- Continue to work with City departments to implement environmental design options and deter re-encampment in open spaces.
- Partner with community groups for restoration of affected habitats.
- Maintain City parks and open spaces for community-wide use.
- Continue to work towards the goal of establishing free or extremely low-cost waste disposal site within the City, and keep the Council updated on progress.
- Expand the Homelessness Response Field Crew Team's ability to regularly remove abandoned litter by providing additional support through contractors, additional equipment, and supplies.
- Conduct assessment and outreach to encampments affecting the City's open spaces in preparation for wildfire and flood season.

# ACTION AREAS & STRATEGIES



## Shelter, Care, and Support

Individuals experiencing homelessness often have complex needs, including mental health issues, substance abuse disorders, and chronic health conditions. Comprehensive support services are essential to help them stabilize their lives, in addition to providing shelter until permanent housing solutions become available.

Ensure equity & access

Reduce the number of unsheltered individuals by providing emergency shelter and supporting programs

- Utilize HMIS data to identify potential equity issues in both rates of homelessness and access to services.
- Include the voices of those with lived experience in design of programs and services.
- Identify ongoing funding for permanent supportive housing projects.
- Continue to offer emergency shelter programs:
  - City Overlook at the Armory
  - 1220 River Street Transitional Community
  - Severe Weather Shelter Program
- Continue to offer safe parking programs:
  - Long-term safe parking
  - Overnight-only safe parking
- Partner to expand emergency shelter capacity, women-only shelters, tiny homes, and sober living environments.
- Provide storage program for persons experiencing homelessness



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# ACTION AREAS & STRATEGIES



## Shelter, Care, and Support

Connect people to behavioral and medical services

Improve assistance to people in navigating the complex network of social services

- Collaborate with the County to expand substance abuse and mental health treatment services.
- Develop partnerships with healthcare providers to reduce exits from the hospital system to homelessness (Janus, HPHP, and Dignity Health).
- Work with community partners to provide behavioral health and substance abuse treatment services.
- Evaluate and enact local housing policies to promote housing development, particularly additional low and very-low income housing.
- Advocate state & federal legislation for housing funding.
- Monitor state legislation and take positions on bills to further housing production statewide.



# ACTION AREAS & STRATEGIES



## Community Safety

Balancing public safety with addressing homelessness is a complex challenge that requires careful consideration including legal, ethical, and practical concerns. While being homeless itself is not a crime, people experiencing homelessness at times engage in unlawful behavior which requires the response of law enforcement.

Equitable enforcement of criminal behavior

Decrease number of calls to law enforcement from individuals experiencing mental health crises

Provide access to basic health needs on the street.

- Collaborate between SCPD, Homeless Response Field Crew, and Outreach Teams to provide equitable & compassionate response.
- Work with the district attorney to successfully prosecute criminal behavior.
- Work with the County to enhance diversion programs for repeat offenders.
- Implement the Mobile Crisis Response Team in collaboration with the County.
- Continue to fund the Mental Health Liaisons positions in collaboration with the County.
- Utilize City outreach specialists to assist officers with individuals who need support.
- Reduce the number of calls for service by the Santa Cruz Fire Department by adding an EMT to the Mobile Crisis Response team.



# Measuring Our Success

## Preventing and Resolving Homelessness

How will we know that our strategic plan is working? The following data points will help us remain focused on our commitment to balancing individual needs with broad community impacts, from prevention strategies to successful pathways toward stable housing.

**Decrease Homelessness: reduce the number of people who are unsheltered and the total number of people experiencing homelessness.**

- # of people who have moved into more stable housing after participating in City programs
- # of people served through City programs
- Point-In-Time Count (PIT Count)
- Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Data

**Prevent homelessness: reduce the number of people who fall into homelessness.**

- PIT Count
- # of people served by the City's eviction prevention program

**Increase affordable housing units: meet and/or exceed RHNA goals.**

- # of transitional, permanent supportive, and below-market-rate housing units that are preserved or produced

**Reduce the impacts of encampments: protect environmentally sensitive areas and ensure equitable access to parks and open spaces for everyone in the community.**

- Reduction in # of calls for service
- Amount of refuse removed from encampments
- Community engagement and annual survey

**Build regional capacity and partnerships to resolve homelessness: build strong partnerships across all sectors to leverage resources, share expertise, and effectively coordinate efforts.**

- Create opportunities to partner on funding, service connection, and outreach.