Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz

A Strategic Framework for Addressing Homelessness in Santa Cruz County

January 2021
to January 2024

Our Mission

Strong collaborative action to ensure all residents within the County have stable, safe, and healthy places to live.

Who We Are

The Housing for Health Division was created in November 2020 within the County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department to support the implementation of this Framework by bringing together a coalition of partners and resources to prevent and end homelessness within our County.

Overview

Homelessness severely impacts the health and quality of life of those living without homes and the entire community. The County of Santa Cruz, cities within the county, and community members recognize the need for strong collaborative action to ensure all county residents have stable, safe, and healthy places to live.

The County and its partners created the Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz County Strategic "Framework" through a collaborative process that used the experience, knowledge and input of a broad set of community stakeholders including cities, non-profit organizations, County Departments, and people with lived experiences of homelessness. Work on it began in March 2019 with a review of current local efforts and data on homelessness, along with an evaluation and discussion of experiences in other communities.

The Framework outlines coalition action steps that can reduce unsheltered and overall homelessness countywide by January 2024. The County Human Services Department's new Housing for Health (H4H) Division will provide leadership and the backbone administrative support for implementation of this Framework.

The Framework sets goals to reduce the number of households experiencing homelessness at a point-in-time by just over 25% between January 2019 and January 2024. It also calls for a 50% reduction in the number of households living "unsheltered" in places such as the streets, parks, cars, and unsafe structures.

2019	**307** Sheltered Households	**1,098** Unsheltered Households	**1,405** Total Homeless Households
2024	**485** Sheltered Households	**549** Unsheltered Households	**1,034** Total Homeless Households

Background

In 2019, California had the fourth highest rate of homelessness per 10,000 residents in the United States. Within California, Santa Cruz County has one of the highest rates of homelessness at 79.3 per 10,000 residents.

Every day, thousands of people in Santa Cruz County live without stable shelter or a home. The most recent annual Homeless Point-in-Time Count, conducted in January 2019, found 2,167 people experiencing homelessness on a single night, representing 1,440 distinct households experiencing homelessness. Nearly three-fourths of those households experiencing homelessness were housed within the County prior to becoming homeless.

Across the country and in Santa Cruz County, homelessness disproportionately impacts particular groups of individuals including specific racial and ethnic groups, youth exiting foster care, seniors and people with disabilities, individuals with behavioral health conditions, single parent households, veterans, people with criminal backgrounds, and individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and two-spirit (LGBTQ2S).

High rates of homelessness among subgroups of extremely low-income households reflect broad historical and present day social, economic, political, and cultural forces that contribute to these disparities. Approaches to addressing homelessness must understand and address some of the forces contributing to these disparate impacts.

What is Causing Homelessness in Our Community?

1

Housing affordability gap

2

Health issues

3

Lack of supportive connections

4

Loss of hope and sense of purpose

1 Housing Affordability Gap

Housing Costs Exceed Incomes

The larger the gap between incomes and housing costs in a region the greater the risk of homelessness and housing instability in a community. This is a major factor contributing to homelessness across the United States.

The California Housing Partnership estimates over 10,000 renter households in Santa Cruz County do not have access to an affordable home. Among these households living with the lowest incomes, three out of four (75%) pay more than 50% of their income toward housing. This group is the most likely to experience housing instability, overcrowded or unsafe living conditions, and homelessness. Within this group are people living on fixed incomes such as seniors and people with disabilities, as well as, unemployed, underemployed, and employed individuals that cannot afford local housing costs.

The 2019 Santa Cruz County Point-In-Time Count of persons experiencing homelessness found 31% reported being employed at the time of the survey. Employment itself cannot prevent homelessness when wages are not high enough to cover housing costs.

This Framework calls for implementing a range of strategies that support reducing housing costs and increasing household incomes.

2 Health Issues Impacting Living Situations

Some health conditions impact a person's ability to manage daily living tasks essential to keeping a home. For example, a person with dementia may struggle to remember to pay their rent. Health care systems, services, and associated policies influence levels of housing instability, institutionalization, and homelessness in a given community.

2 Health Issues Impacting Living Situations (cont.)

This Framework calls for implementing a range of policy and program changes to address the health care needs of people at-risk of or currently experiencing homelessness. This includes connecting people to holistic services, supports, and treatment that address both their health and daily living needs.

3 Lack of Supportive Connections

Loss or Absence of Strengthening Relationships

The absence or loss of supportive relationships can contribute to housing instability and loss, particularly in areas with large housing affordability gaps. Histories of traumatic events and relationships, in both childhood and adulthood, are prevalent at far higher rates among people experiencing homelessness compared to the general population. The 2019, Santa Cruz County Point-In-Time count of homeless persons, found:

39% were living with friends or relatives before becoming homeless

10% reported family/domestic violence as a primary event leading to their homelessness

9% identified a divorce, separation, or breakup as a primary cause

This Framework calls for implementing a range of strategies that help grow long-term and broadly supportive relationships for those experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness.

4 Loss of Hope and Sense of Purpose

A loss of hope and sense of purpose, at the community and individual level, can contribute to events that compromise a stable living situation and lead to prolonged episodes of homelessness. Living without a home can be a profoundly stigmatizing and isolating event.

This Framework calls for implementing a range of strategies that enhance feelings of hope and meaning among community members, people experiencing homelessness, and those working to make a difference in their lives.

Our Vision

To align and develop the array of resources, stakeholders, and collective wisdom across the greater Santa Cruz community to promote public health and make significant impacts on the crisis of homelessness, benefiting all residents, particularly those without homes.

Person Centered

People experiencing homelessness are experts about their own goals, priorities, and support needs. Housing and services coordinated by the housing crisis response system must center around the self-identified needs and goals of people seeking support.

Equity & Inclusion Lens

Certain subgroups of people experience higher rates of homelessness. Efforts undertaken through this Framework will work to eliminate disparities in access and outcomes within the housing crisis response system.

System Approach

A coordinated system approach that streamlines access to housing and services will maximize efforts to address homelessness.

Data Driven

Decisions about programs, resources, and approaches must be informed by high quality, well-understood qualitative and quantitative data about the system and its outcomes for the people it serves, including measures of disparities and inequity.

Countywide Scope

Homelessness occurs in all parts of Santa Cruz County, whether urban, suburban, agricultural, or rural. Implementation of this Framework will address each area of the community and develop appropriate solutions to homelessness. Geographic equity must be at the center of this framework.

Actionable

This Framework must result in actionable steps. It must be understood, implemented, and evaluated with the resources available and with clear responsibilities and accountability. System leaders and stakeholders will regularly review progress and update plans to ensure continued progress towards meeting goals and targets.

Our Goals

Substantially reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness.[1]

Number of households experiencing unsheltered homelessness will decrease by 50%

Number of households experiencing homelessness will decrease by 25%

Core Goal #1
Improve the effectiveness of all programs in helping people secure housing

The new Housing for Health (H4H) Division and its partners will oversee a robust effort to improve the effectiveness of all programs and interventions for people experiencing homelessness. This includes shortening the time people remain unhoused or in programs prior to securing housing, increasing the rate at which people find housing, and decreasing the number of people that become homeless. Interim benchmarks for these focus areas have been established for each year and progress will be regularly assessed. Adjustments will be made as needed to maximize results. By the end of 2023, the following system performance measurement improvements will be achieved:

Measure	Emergency Shelter		Transitional Housing		Rapid Rehousing*		Permanent Supportive Housing**	
	FROM	TO	FROM	TO	FROM	TO	FROM	TO
Reduce Length of Stay (in days)	76	60	413	250	281	180	N/A	
Increase Rehousing Rate	21%	40%	66%	80%	62%	85%	N/A	

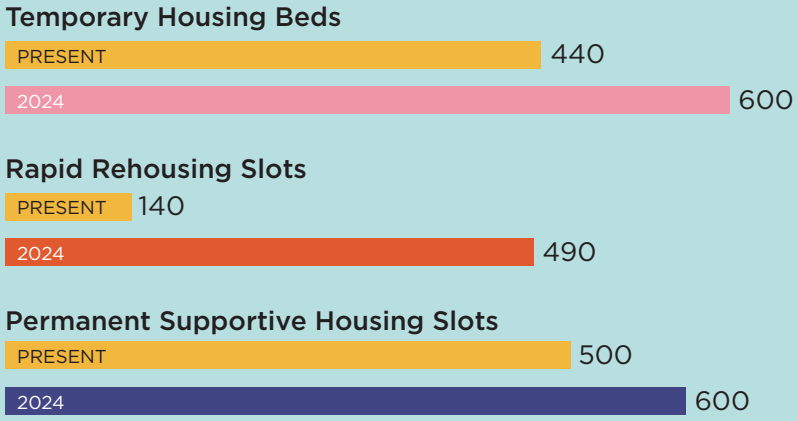
[1] Goals are based on the Focus Strategies Santa Cruz County Predictive Modeling Summary Report 10.23.2020.

*Rapid Rehousing
Providing services and time-limited rental support to assist a homeless individual or family to move as quickly as possible into permanent housing and achieve stability in housing.

**Permanent Supportive Housing
Combines permanent affordable housing with ongoing integrated health and human services for people with disabilities, including people with long histories of homelessness.

Core Goal #2
Expand capacity within the homelessness response system

Improvements in performance alone will not result in significant reductions in homelessness. During the three-year period of this Framework, community leadership, funders, and key stakeholders will work collaboratively to implement targeted expansions in resources and permanent housing pathways.



Strategies and Key Objectives

The Framework promotes aligned and coordinated efforts among housing crisis response system stakeholders. Individual programs or initiatives may yield results with a specific subpopulation or group but making progress on the overall size of the homeless population requires a systematic approach.

Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz County sets out four high-level strategic areas and numerous specific objectives to transform current efforts to address homelessness. The objectives listed below will span over multiple six-month action plan cycles.

How Change Will Happen

1

Build a Coalition

Develop a strong and informed action-oriented partnership with leaders and stakeholders within the community.

2

Prevent Homelessness

Use targeted prevention and early intervention housing problem solving to help people and families keep or return to housing as quickly as possible.

3

Increase Connections

Expand and improve "Front Door" programs and services including outreach, temporary housing and supportive services.

4

Expand Permanent Housing

Increase permanent housing and income growth resources and opportunities to become housed.

1 Build a Coalition

What We Are Doing

Design, launch, and operate a new regional coalition, anchored by a leadership and accountability structure.

Authentically and meaningfully involve people with lived experience of homelessness in system design and oversight.

Establish the Housing for Health (H4H) division within the Human Services Department and provide enough resources to support implementation (including six-month work plans), ongoing data and evaluation, community education, information sharing, and administrative support of the new regional coalition.

Develop and maintain commitment to become fully data-informed at all levels of the housing crisis response system.

Develop collaborative work teams to achieve previously established goals of “functional zero” homelessness among families and veterans.

2 Prevent Homelessness

What We Are Doing

Implement Housing Problem Solving systemwide by integrating this practice into the countywide Smart Path-Coordinated Entry process, which streamlines access to housing assistance and services.

Coordinate with other local entities to provide targeted prevention assistance; prioritize prevention assistance for those at most severe risk of homelessness.

3 Increase Connections

What We Are Doing

Continue to ensure shelters are safe and supportive environments that protect the health of their residents.

Reduce eligibility barriers to shelters, particularly for people with disabling conditions and/or those with a history of not participating in the existing shelter system.

Ensure shelter residents are provided care management, housing navigation and financial supports that help them secure housing, making shelter stays a brief stop on the pathway to housing. Include rapid housing problem-solving practices in all shelters.

Develop capacity for health- and housing-focused street outreach to connect all people experiencing unsheltered homelessness with crisis support services, while helping them develop a health and housing plan and secure permanent housing.

3 Increase Connections

What We Are Doing (cont.)

Expand and improve health and human service care management and housing navigation programs for people at-risk of or currently experiencing homelessness.

Work together with city jurisdictions and other County departments to identify and implement best practices for collaborative responses to unmanaged homeless encampments and community health and safety issues that arise from people living without shelter in public places.

4 Expand Permanent Housing

What We Are Doing

Work with local jurisdictions to reach a countywide Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) goal of at least 734 new housing units affordable to people with very low incomes by December 2023.

Develop or purchase housing units specifically targeted to people experiencing homelessness.

Expand and improve the effectiveness of rapid rehousing rental assistance programs to quickly return people to housing.

Develop and execute an engagement strategy for property owner/ manager recruitment.

Implement changes to the local Coordinated Entry system to support faster access to housing assistance and services and better housing outcomes.

Acknowledgments

Community Stakeholders

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Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz County calls for the entire community to join in being part of the solution to homelessness.

No single individual, organization, city, or County Department can do this alone. This strategic Framework is one that all stakeholders can use to align, coordinate, and collaborate to accomplish the shared goal of helping unhoused residents in Santa Cruz County secure housing. In a community with a severely limited affordable housing supply and homelessness at a crisis level, it is necessary to invest in and support practices that help the most people get and keep permanent housing. By involving those with histories of homelessness and housing instability in our efforts, setting measurable goals, working collaboratively across sectors on proven strategies, using data to assess progress, and continually improving and refining the work, Santa Cruz County can and will ensure all its residents have a healthy and safe place to call home.