



Caution is Needed When Considering “Sanctioned Encampments” or “Safe Zones”

In their 2017 Point-in-Time counts, some communities reported significant increases in the number of people experiencing homelessness. These increases were driven primarily by increases in the number of individuals (people in households without children) who are unsheltered—living and sleeping outside, in tents, in parks, in cars or RVs, in encampments, or in other places not meant for human habitation. These increases were seen largely in communities facing significant challenges within their rental markets—rapidly increasing rents, competition for units, and a limited supply of housing that people can afford.

Addressing the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness is an issue that often generates contentious, emotional debates across communities. It requires urgent action. Understandably, leaders and housing and services providers within such communities want to find ways to address both the immediate safety and living conditions of the people who are unsheltered and the concerns of other community members.

In response, some communities have created, or are considering creating “sanctioned encampments,” “safe zones,” or other similar settings with a goal of helping people stay in a safer and more sanitary environment, without the risk of being arrested or cited. Sometimes these settings feature sheds or other structures, or provide areas for people to stay in their cars or RVs. Others simply provide places for people to sleep in their own tents or on mats. Some communities have created these environments as a voluntary option for people living in unsafe situations. In other cases, people living outside may be compelled to move to the designated locations through the threat of citation or arrest. Before communities make the decision to create such environments, it is important to weigh the costs and consequences of that action, and the impact on the community’s systemic efforts to end homelessness.


If your community is exploring this step, here are a few cautions we think you should consider and discuss:

- **Creating these environments may make it look and feel like the community is taking action to end homelessness on the surface—but, by themselves, they have little impact on reducing homelessness.** Ultimately, access to stable housing that people can afford, with the right level of services to help them succeed, is what ends homelessness. People staying within such settings are still unsheltered, still living

As we respond to the crisis of unsheltered homelessness, we must not repeat past mistakes of focusing only on where people will be tonight. We must simultaneously be focused on where people can succeed in the long term—and we know that is permanent housing.

Executive Director Matthew Doherty
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outside, and remain homeless – and oftentimes, these settings are not providing them with a truly safe, healthy, and secure environment. It is also important to note that the intended target population may not decide to enter these settings. Additionally, if there is not adequate planning and resources devoted to help people exit these settings on a path out of homelessness, creating these settings alone does not reduce homelessness in communities.



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- **Creating these environments can be costly in money, staff time, and effort.** Creating and then operating such settings typically requires significant funding, energy, and staff time from both public and private agencies devoted to locating and arranging for the use of sites, educating and engaging neighbors, addressing any permitting requirements, providing a secure and hygienic environment, setting up and maintaining any structures, providing adequate services and supports, and many other planning and operational details. It is critically important to discuss the opportunity costs of pursuing these efforts, and whether critical resources would be better focused on other strategic activities—or used directly for permanent housing and services interventions—that could have a greater impact on ending people’s homelessness.
- **These environments can prove difficult to manage and maintain.** For example, communities often find that temporary sheds (which are sometimes referred to as "tiny homes") or other structures that may have been put up in these settings do not hold up over time and require significant upgrades and/or repairs. Maintaining a hygienic environment can prove challenging if there are not adequate sanitation facilities at the sites. And there often need to be significant investments into security to be able to ensure the safety and well-being of people staying in these settings, as many people may be vulnerable to victimization and such communities can become targets for illegal activities, such as drug sales and human trafficking.
- **Although often proposed as “temporary” approaches, these programs prove difficult to close once they open.** While a community may intend for these settings to be a temporary part of its response to homelessness, they can prove difficult to close, especially if there are not adequate plans and resources dedicated to helping people exit these settings and end their homelessness.

If your community does decide to proceed despite these cautions, we’d suggest you also discuss the following:


- **Are we doing all we can within our existing emergency shelter programs, and can we also create more effective indoor shelter or crisis housing options, if needed?** These outdoor environments should not take the place of suitable indoor emergency shelter and other crisis housing options, which can be provided in a variety of settings, from designated facilities, to hotels and motels, to new and existing housing units, and many others. Many communities are transforming their current shelter systems or creating additional safer, low-barrier indoor shelter spaces where people can come inside “as they are” and access services.

Communities have removed barriers to entry, including by accepting diverse household compositions, staying open 24/7 or for extended hours, welcoming people with behavioral health care needs, providing for secure storage of belongings, and allowing for pets. In addition, communities are focused on increasing their capacity

to directly link individuals in emergency shelter or other crisis housing options to resources and services that help them to move out of homelessness.

For most communities, improving the existing shelter system can address the needs of people sleeping unsheltered and in encampments. Similarly, providing more housing options for people in shelters can help people exit more quickly and expand the number of people a shelter can serve over time. When creating new shelter and crisis housing capacity, communities are also purposefully using sites that can be used in the future for other purposes, such as conversion to permanent housing.

- Are we planning and budgeting for how people staying in these settings will be able to exit homelessness and access permanent housing?** The creation of these environments is often pursued with urgency, but the planning is sometimes too rushed and the alignment of the services and housing solutions that will be necessary to help people exit is often thought of as something that can be addressed later. If these settings are to play any meaningful role in ending people’s homelessness, it is vitally important to ensure that people staying in them will have ready access to the services necessary to address their needs and to exit homelessness. Planning and adequately budgeting for people’s permanent housing outcomes should be central from the very first conversations and at every stage of the planning processes. That budgeting should include costs aligned with the number of successful exits being pursued. For example, if every “slot” or “space” is intended to turn over through successful exits every 60 days, has planning and budgeting addressed how 6 such successful exits per “slot” or “space” will be achieved?
- Are we aiming as high as we can in providing a high-quality environment within these temporary settings?** Families and individuals experiencing the crisis of unsheltered homelessness deserve access to decent, high-quality places to stay as they create their paths out of homelessness. The creation of poor quality environments can reinforce negative perceptions about what people experiencing homelessness need or deserve as living environments. In many cases, the planning for these settings in communities does not seem to have been thoughtful enough about the quality of the environment they are providing; sometimes even basic safety or health issues, such as ventilation or heat, have not been planned for. There should be close consultation with public health officials to be sure land being used is not contaminated, that essential health, hygiene, and safety needs are being met, and that further public health problems are not being created. It is also essential to discuss whether the settings being planned will provide an environment for the target population—which sometimes includes pregnant women and children—that is aligned with your community’s values and expectations. *For example:* Within your community’s systemic response to homelessness, is it acceptable for infants and small children to be sleeping in tents or in sheds tonight?
- Are we assessing the outcomes, impact, and cost-effectiveness of these efforts?** Programs being operated in such settings should be integrated into the community’s existing Homeless Management Information System



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and performance measurement processes. The outcomes being achieved—including a primary emphasis on the outcome of exits from homelessness—should be carefully measured and monitored. The community should assess whether the investment of costs—including all planning, capital, operations, services, and housing placement assistance costs—is proving to be a cost-effective investment in comparison with other actual or potential strategies and programs.

At USICH, and with our federal and national partners, we will continue to work with communities that are grappling with these challenges and connect them to peers in other communities to learn from each other. We will also continue to develop and provide more guidance regarding effective responses to these challenges. Contact your [USICH Regional Coordinator](#) if you need help thinking through these issues.

As you consider these cautions and concerns and engage in discussions, here are some USICH resources that may be helpful:

- [Ten Strategies to End Chronic Homelessness](#)
- [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments](#)
- [Case Studies on: Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments](#)
- [The Role of Outreach and Engagement in Ending Homelessness](#)
- [Key Considerations for Implementing Emergency Shelter Within an Effective Crisis Response System](#)
- [Asking the Right Questions about Tiny Houses](#)
- [Strategies to Address the Intersection Between the Opioid Crisis and Homelessness](#)
- [Resources for Building an Effective Crisis Response System](#)
- [The Housing First Checklist: Assessing Projects and Systems for Housing First Orientation](#)