



Department of Commerce

State of Washington Homeless Housing Crisis Response System Strategic Plan 2019-2024

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Executive Summary

Overview

This update to Washington State's Homeless Housing Strategic Plan describes the specific actions the state will take over the next five years to work toward the vision of no person left living outside. Through continuing performance improvement efforts and state and local investments, the successful implementation of this plan is estimated to reduce unsheltered homelessness by 12% in 2024.

Commerce developed this plan in consultation with local governments, people experiencing homelessness and the state agencies that are part of the Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Highlights

This updated plan includes an expanded focus on improving the identification and prioritization of people experiencing homelessness to ensure those with the greatest need receive limited homeless housing resources. The plan includes a special focus on preventing youth and young adult homelessness and ensuring their access to developmentally age-appropriate housing and services. And for the first time, the state plan includes initiatives to identify and address inequities in services and outcomes relating to race, ethnicity, disabilities, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and other marginalized communities.

The plan continues Washington's nation-leading effort to provide transparency and accountability regarding the use of local, state, federal and private funding spent on homelessness. Commerce expanded and refined the contractually required system performance measures, and the state is expanding the technical assistance available to help counties meet required performance benchmarks. Under this plan, refinement of existing online tools will make it easier for everyone to understand the outcomes delivered with the money spent.

Next Steps

Commerce will update this plan in 2020 to incorporate the diversity of approaches to address homelessness that the county plans and local estimates of the resources needed to bring everyone inside will contain. The county plans are due for completion in December 2019.

Introduction

In 2005, the Washington State Legislature passed the Homeless Housing and Assistance Act (RCW 43.185C). The act outlined bold policies to address homelessness and directs the Department of Commerce to “prepare and publish a five-year homeless housing strategic plan which must outline statewide goals and performance measures.”

The 2018 Legislature added the following new requirements to the plan:

- a) “Performance measures and goals to reduce homelessness, including long-term and short-term goals;
- b) “An analysis of the services and programs being offered at the state and county level and an identification of those representing best practices and outcomes;
- c) “Recognition of services and programs targeted to certain homeless populations or geographic areas in recognition of the diverse needs across the state;
- d) “New or innovative funding, program, or service strategies to pursue;
- e) “An analysis of either current drivers of homelessness or improvements to housing security, or both, such as increases and reductions to employment opportunities, housing scarcity and affordability, health and behavioral health services, chemical dependency treatment, and incarceration rates; and
- f) “An implementation strategy outlining the roles and responsibilities at the state and local level and timelines to achieve a reduction in homelessness at the statewide level during periods of the five-year homeless housing strategic plan.”

Commerce is adopting the:

- “Home, Together: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness”¹ goal to end homelessness
- Federal criteria and benchmarks for ending homelessness for each subpopulation

Aligning with the federal benchmarks and criteria positions Washington to strategically compete for federal funding and effectively report on outcomes. Additionally, Washington is leading nationally on accounting for every dollar spent on homeless housing services and projects. In 2019 so far, Washington is performing above average in two of the federal system performance measures: exits to permanent housing and returns to homelessness.²

¹ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, “Home Together: The Federal Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness,” (2019), https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Home-Together-Federal-Strategic-Plan-to-Prevent-and-End-Homelessness.pdf

Read more about the criteria and benchmarks at https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Youth-Criteria-and-Benchmarks-revised-Feb-2018.pdf

² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “2017 HUD System Performance Data,” (2017), <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5691/system-performance-measures-data-since-fy-2015/>

While the goal to end homelessness is broad, this plan outlines the work Commerce can achieve over the next five years within existing law and resources to support an effective homeless crisis response system. The plan outlines how an effective homeless crisis response system operates and identifies long- and short-term system goals and objectives. In addition to these plan elements, two appendices summarize a listening tour Commerce conducted in early 2019 and offer additional information the Legislature required.

OUR VISION

No person left living outside.

OUR MISSION

Support homeless crisis response systems that efficiently reduce the number of people living outside and, when scaled appropriately, can house all unsheltered people.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- All people deserve a safe place to live.
- Urgent and bold action is the appropriate response to people living outside.
- Interventions must be data-driven and evidence-based.

System Work

Homeless crisis response systems respond to the immediacy and urgency of homelessness to help ensure everyone has a safe and appropriate place to live. A system must also target and prioritize resources for people with the greatest needs, so they are quickly “screened in” for housing assistance. The goal of a high-functioning system is to reach the balance between need and capacity, often referred to as “functional zero,” so that when a person becomes homeless, an immediate system response quickly moves that person back into housing.

A homeless crisis response system best practices approach yields higher housing retention rates, lower returns to homelessness, and significant reductions in the use of crisis services.³

Core elements of a high-performing homeless crisis response system capable of bringing everyone inside include the following:

- People fleeing violence⁴ can access the homeless crisis response system safely.
- Problem-solving strategies are first used to solve a housing crisis. Family and friends are engaged if the situation is safe and appropriate.
- People are prioritized based on need, using a transparent and consistently applied coordinated entry process.
- Access to housing and services is contingent on rules no more restrictive than typical leases.
- Housing and service goals are client-driven.
- Clients receive support in developing housing stability plans that address client safety and barriers to permanent housing.
- Programs quickly move most clients into market-rate housing and stay available as requested to maintain housing stability.
- Programs provide the assistance needed to secure housing and offer more only when it is necessary to prevent a return to homelessness.
- Programs intervene with permanent supportive housing when clients have a disability that impacts their ability to live independently, and market-rate housing placements have proven ineffective in resolving their homelessness.
- Programs share client data among systems as allowable by law to improve the coordination of services.
- Promptly identify and engage people living in places not meant for habitation.⁵

³ United States Council on Homelessness, *Deploy Housing First Systemwide*, (last updated: 2018)

<https://www.usich.gov/solutions/housing/housing-first/>

⁴ This includes domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, trafficking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member.

⁵ This includes living outside or in a place that is not designed or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a vehicle, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or campground.

System Goals and Objectives

Successful implementation of the plan goals and objectives is estimated by 2024 to increase the number of households housed annually by 5,300, reducing unsheltered homelessness by 12%.

For the period 2019 to 2024, the estimate assumes:

- Annual population growth of 1.3%
- Annual general inflation of 2%
- Annual rent increases above general inflation of 1%
- An investment of \$175 million in state capital funds dedicated to permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness successfully matched by federal and local resources, resulting in 3,124 new units
- The addition of 1,000 Housing and Essential Needs Program slots for literally homeless persons⁶
- The addition of 122 slots for chronically homeless families with children
- 166 new permanent supportive housing units funded with private donations
- A \$37 million per year increase in homeless crisis response system funds over current levels by 2024 to account for the inflation and population growth costs of maintaining existing levels of service.⁷

The amended 2009 federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act includes system performance measures designed to help communities measure the overall impact of their homeless crisis response system in ending homelessness. While the long-term goal of Commerce's efforts is that no person is left living outside, the agency's short-term system goals align with the federal homeless system performance measures and guide Commerce's efforts.

The homeless system performance measures listed below are quantifiable metrics designed to evaluate the impact the homeless response system has on the homeless population. Many factors outside of the homeless crisis response system could impact these measures and the overall number of people experiencing homelessness. Homeless crisis response systems narrowly focus on the immediate needs of people experiencing homelessness and do not aim

⁶ U.S. Housing and Urban Development, "Homeless Definition," (n.d.), https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf

"Literally Homeless: (1) Individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning: (i) Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation; (ii) Is living in a publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregate shelters, transitional housing, and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state and local government programs); or (iii) Is exiting an institution where (s)he has resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution"

⁷ For more details, see estimate here: <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/homelessness/state-strategic-plan-annual-report-and-audits/>. Estimate will be updated in 2020 based on estimates provided in local homeless housing strategic plans due to be completed by December 2019.

to resolve or have the capacity to address the structural issues that cause homelessness, such as social inequalities of income, wealth and opportunity and a failure of the social safety net.⁸

Table 1: Short-Term Homeless System Performance Goals

Homeless System Performance Measure	State Target
Prioritize unsheltered homeless households living in a place not meant for habitation as well as those fleeing violence, including domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, trafficking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against an individual or family member.	Serve at least 60% of unsheltered homeless households.
Increase exits to permanent housing.	The percentage of exits to permanent housing reaches the level of the top performing 20% of homeless systems nationwide.
Reduce returns to homelessness.	Reduce returns to homelessness after exit to permanent housing to less than 10%.
Reduce the length of time in homelessness.	Reduce the average length of time being homeless to fewer than 90 days.

System Objectives

- Objective 1: Quickly identify and engage people experiencing homelessness through outreach and coordination with systems that assist homeless subpopulations
- Objective 2: Prioritize housing for people who have the greatest need for immediate access to assistance
- Objective 3: Work toward people living unsheltered having immediate access to temporary housing
- Objective 4: Work toward people experiencing homelessness having permanent housing options
- Objective 5: Prevent youth and young adults from experiencing homelessness.
- Objective 6: Make certain that youth experiencing homelessness receive appropriate services
- Objective 7: Address inequities in services and outcomes among people experiencing homelessness
- Objective 8: Maintain an effective, efficient and transparent homeless crisis response system

⁸ Center for Evidenced-Based Solutions, *Homelessness Prevention*, (2019), <http://www.evidenceonhomelessness.com/topic/homelessness-prevention/>

Implementation Plan

The following tables describe the actions Commerce will take to implement the objectives, how the agency will measure success, and when the agency will complete the actions supporting the objectives. Commerce will expand this high-level implementation plan with additional details and regular updates that the State Advisory Council on Homelessness and the Interagency Council on Homelessness will review.

Objective 1: Identify and Engage People Experiencing Homelessness

Quickly identify and engage people experiencing homelessness through outreach and coordination with systems that assist homeless subpopulations.		
Connection to the goal: People living unsheltered cannot be housed if they are not identified, and progress toward the goal of ending homelessness cannot be accurately assessed without knowing the universe of people experiencing homelessness.		
Commerce Action	Measure of Success	Timeline
Provide effective problem-solving strategies and technical assistance on how to identify and engage people living in places not meant for human habitation.	Office of Family and Adult Homelessness and Office of Homeless Youth grantees access technical assistance. Coordinated Entry Systems comply with Coordinated Entry System requirements.	2019-2021, ongoing
Provide technical assistance to ensure coordinated entry process accessibility, safety and confidentiality for households whose members are fleeing violence (including domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking or trafficking).	Coordinated Entry Systems access technical assistance and comply with Coordinated Entry requirements.	2019–2021, ongoing

Objective 2: Prioritize the Greatest Need

Prioritize housing for people who have the greatest need for immediate access to assistance.		
Connection to the goal: When people who have the greatest needs are left outside, they are more likely to experience trauma or injury, making it more difficult to ultimately bring them inside. ⁹		
Commerce Action	Measure of Success	Timeline
Provide training and technical assistance on the Washington State Coordinated Entry Guidelines. ¹⁰	Office of Family and Adult Homelessness and Office of Homeless Youth grantees access technical assistance.	2019-2021, ongoing
Assess the coordinated entry process performance and compliance with requirements and provide technical assistance on any deficiencies.	Assess 60% of counties in 2019 and 40% in 2020. Develop a plan to ensure compliance with federal Coordinated Entry Requirements.	2019-2021
Explore performance improvement requirements and benchmarks for successful housing placements or housing retention of prioritized people.	Include performance improvement requirements and benchmarks for successful housing placements or housing retention of prioritized people	2024
Annually monitor the unsheltered prioritization performance improvement requirements and provide technical assistance on any deficiencies.	80% of counties move into compliance after any corrective action.	2019, ongoing

⁹ Roncarati et al, "Mortality Among Unsheltered Homeless Adults in Boston, Massachusetts, 2000-2009," (2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30073282>

¹⁰ Washington State Department of Commerce, "Washington State Coordinated Entry Guidelines," <https://deptofcommerce.app.box.com/s/3rwdm9w1wdguncuucfbnubt0aqhsd0wf>

Objective 3: Bring Everyone Inside

Work toward people living unsheltered having immediate access to temporary housing.		
Connection to the goal: Living outside is a barrier to resolving the issues that contribute to people becoming homeless.		
Commerce Action	Measure of Success	Timeline
Publish estimates of the unmet temporary housing and services need and the costs of meeting the state's vision that no person is left living outside.	Estimates include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rents increase at the same rate as inflation Rents annually decrease 2% below the rate of inflation Rents annually increase by 2% above the rate of inflation 	2020
Monitor low-barrier requirements and provide technical assistance on any deficiencies.	Assess 80% of counties in 2019 and 20% in 2020. Counties receive technical assistance plans that, if implemented, would bring them into compliance with state low-barrier requirements.	2019-2021
Support state-funded projects to expand low-barrier requirements to reduce barriers	40% of counties expand low-barrier program and facilities access by 2022. 60% of counties expand low-barrier program and facility access by 2024.	2022-2024

Objective 4: House Everyone Permanently

Work toward people experiencing homelessness having permanent housing options.		
Connection to the goal: People living in temporary housing are considered homeless, so moving people into permanent and stable housing options is central to the goal of ending homelessness.		
Commerce Action	Measure of Success	Timeline
Publish estimates of the unmet permanent housing and services need and the costs of meeting the state's vision that no person is left living outside.	Estimates include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rents increase at the same rate as inflation Rents annually decrease 2% below the rate of inflation Rents annually increase by 2% above the rate of inflation 	2020
Apply annually for federal Continuum of Care funds for the Balance of State projects and comply with reporting requirements.	Applications include new and existing projects. Submit applications and reports on time.	2019, ongoing
Actively seek new federal fund opportunities for Balance of State counties to expand housing inventory.	Award applications.	Ongoing

Objective 5: Prevent Youth Homelessness

Prevent youth and young adults from experiencing homelessness.		
Connection to the goal: Preventing youth and young adults from becoming homeless directly contributes to the goal of ending homelessness.		
Commerce Action	Measure of Success	Timeline
Ensure that youth who exit public systems of care exit into safe and stable housing (per Substitute Senate Bill 6560, 2018). Public systems of care include foster care, juvenile justice, behavioral health and the Office of Homeless Youth programs.	<p>Submit a state plan to the Legislature by Dec.31, 2019.</p> <p>Develop data-tracking mechanisms to measure the number of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness or housing instability within 12 months of exit from a public system.</p> <p>Implement and evaluate system-of-care/innovation grants to test innovative approaches to prevent youth from exiting systems of care into homelessness.</p>	2018, ongoing
Develop policy and funding solutions that provide families and youth in crisis with the supports they need to become or stay healthy and resilient.	Submit recommendations to the Legislature through the Families and Youth in Crisis report (ESSB 6032, 2018).	2018, ongoing
Make diversion an allowable activity through the Office of Homeless Youth's Street Outreach Services grant. Provide technical assistance to grantees on effective diversion strategies. Measure effectiveness and implement continuous quality improvement processes.	<p>Update the 2019-21 Street Outreach Services program guidelines to include diversion as an allowable cost.</p> <p>90% of Street Outreach Services grantees receive technical assistance.</p> <p>Data reflects that youth and young adults served through diversion avoid entering the homeless crisis response system.</p>	2019, ongoing

Objective 6: Make Certain That Youth Experiencing Homelessness Receive Appropriate Services

Make certain that youth experiencing homelessness are offered age and developmentally appropriate access to services that support permanent connections, education and employment, and well-being.		
Connection to the goal: Services can help youth build resiliency that prevents homelessness and promotes stability through increased income, connections to supportive social networks and general well-being.		
Commerce Action	Measure of Success	Timeline
<p>Through the Office of Homeless Youth, lead the Interagency Workgroup on Youth Homelessness to engage state agencies in addressing the education, employment, and well-being needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.</p> <p>Implement the Office of Homeless Youth program performance measures that evaluate outcomes related to stable housing, education, employment, permanent connections, and social and emotional well-being.</p>	<p>2019-21 program contracts include performance measures and data-reporting requirements.</p> <p>The Interagency Workgroup on Youth Homelessness develops cross-sector strategies to address youth and young adult homelessness.</p>	<p>2019, ongoing</p>

Objective 7: Address Inequities in Services and Outcomes Among People Experiencing Homelessness

Connection to the goal: Systems that cannot effectively engage all people cannot end homelessness.		
Commerce Action	Measure of Success	Timeline
Conduct data analysis to understand the scope of inequities as it relates to race, ethnicity, disabilities, people who identify as LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities.	Conduct research and publish a report.	2022
Work with stakeholders to develop equity measures and benchmarks that are added to the state and county report cards and included in contracts for state homeless housing funds.	Hold feedback sessions with stakeholders after publishing the report to identify measures and benchmarks.	2022-2023
Procure trainer on protected classes for Commerce homeless housing staff and grantees.	Trainer under contract.	2020, ongoing
Use an equity tool to review and evaluate homeless program guidelines and policies. Use the tool to ensure the equitable distribution of resources.	Identify subject matter experts and peer state agency consultants to advise on the equity tool. Develop policies to use the tool to ensure equitable resource distribution.	2020

Objective 8: Maintain an Effective, Efficient and Transparent Homeless Crisis Response System

Connection to the goal: Improved efficiency increases the number of people who can be housed with limited resources, and a system that transparently demonstrates its efficiency is more likely to receive the resources necessary to end homelessness.		
Commerce Action	Measure of success	Timeline
Publish Washington’s homeless system performance as compared to other states	Publish performance results annually.	2019, ongoing
Publish state, county and project level homeless system performance outcomes.	Publish performance outcomes annually and quarterly.	2019, ongoing
Complete annual state and federal reporting. ¹¹	Submit accurate reports on time.	Ongoing
Require progress toward homeless system performance targets as a condition of state funding.	Include in Consolidated Homeless Grant contracts the homeless system performance improvement requirements for rapid rehousing, emergency shelter, transitional housing and permanent supportive housing.	2019, ongoing
Provide technical assistance and training on homeless system performance improvement strategies. Develop performance improvement plans for grantees who are not meeting performance improvement benchmarks.	The percentage of exits to permanent housing reaches the level of the top performing 20% of homeless systems nationwide. Reduce returns to homelessness after exits to permanent housing to less than 10%. Reduce the average length of time homeless to fewer than 90 days.	2019-2024
Improve homeless system performance measures through consultation with national experts and peer agencies on the Washington State Interagency Council on Homelessness.	Meet with the Washington State Interagency Council on Homelessness quarterly. Maintain a contract with a performance consultant.	Ongoing
Engage people who have experienced homelessness to provide meaningful opportunities for input and expert advice.	Schedule listening tours and meet with advocacy groups to gather feedback on the Office of Family and Adult Homelessness and Office of Homeless Youth program policies.	Ongoing
Pursue federal and state policy changes necessary to achieve the state’s vision that no person is left living outside.	Provide feedback on federal homeless housing policy changes and advocate for program improvements. Develop budget requests that increase funding for homeless housing programs.	Ongoing
Provide training on homeless service provision core competencies, including trauma-informed care, mental health first aid, racial equity, LGBTQ+ competency, and other training identified by the Office of Homeless Youth and Office of Family and Adult Homelessness.	Office of Family and Adult Homelessness and Office of Homeless Youth grantees comply with the training requirements.	2019-2022, ongoing

¹¹ For more details, see <https://public.tableau.com/profile/comhau#!/>

Analysis of Services and Programs

RCW 43.185c.045 requires that all counties in Washington report all expenditures for homeless housing projects in their communities by funding source (federal, state and local). Commerce combines this data with Homeless Management Information System data to create a comprehensive report that discusses both expenditures and outcomes.

In state fiscal year 2018, 2,355 projects spent \$255,040,669 assisting 152,068 households¹² experiencing or at imminent risk of homelessness. The table below summarizes the number of beds and cost per intervention.

Table 3: Analysis of Services and Programs Offered in Washington, State Fiscal Year 2018

Measure	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	Rapid Rehousing	Permanent Supportive Housing	Homelessness Prevention
People entering annually	46,184	3,152	18,488	2,119	11,628
Operating cost per day	\$32	\$33	\$52	\$27	n/a
Operating cost per stay	\$1,405	\$8,979	\$8,384	n/a	n/a
Operating cost per successful exit	\$8,745	\$16,054	\$10,412	n/a	n/a
Exits to permanent housing	37%	63%	80%	n/a	n/a
Returns to homelessness	20%	12%	12%	n/a	n/a

The state fiscal year 2018 homeless housing projects expenditure and data report is available at <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/homelessness/state-strategic-plan-annual-report-and-audits/>.

To find out how Commerce uses expenditure data, visit <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/homelessness/homeless-system-performance/>.

¹² About 5.4% of 2.7 million households in Washington State

Services and Programs Targeted to Specific Populations

RCW 43.185C.040(1)(c) requires this plan to include “Recognition of services and programs to certain homeless populations or geographic areas in recognition of the diverse needs across the state.” This section highlights some of the high-performing efforts tailored to specific populations or geographic areas, ranked by percentage point change.

Table 4: Top Five Improved Exits to Permanent Housing from Rural Emergency Shelters

County or Region	7/1/2016-6/30/2017	7/1/2017-6/30/2018	% Change
Grant and Adams counties	14.8%	26.6%	+11.8
Ferry and Stevens counties	63.3%	72.7%	+9.5
Island County	34.8%	44.1%	+9.3
Clallam County	33.0%	41.0%	+8.0
Lewis County	43.9%	50.4%	+6.5

Table 5: Top Five Improved Exits to Permanent Housing from Suburban and Urban Emergency Shelters

County or Region	7/1/2016-6/30/2017	7/1/2017-6/30/2018	% Change
Benton and Franklin counties	33.3%	57.2%	+23.9
Cowlitz County	26.7%	44.8%	+18.1
Thurston County	17.0%	31.6%	+14.6
Clark County	27.5%	33.6%	+6.1
Yakima County	19.7%	22.1%	+2.4

Table 6: Top Five Improved Exits to Permanent Housing from Rural Rapid Rehousing

County or Region	7/1/2016-6/30/2017	7/1/2017-6/30/2018	% Change
Pacific County	51.0%	64.3%	+13.3
Island County	75.5%	86.5%	+10.9
Clallam County	77.4%	87.6%	+10.2
Okanogan County	88.9%	91.7%	+2.8
Grays Harbor County	74.6%	76.7%	+2.2

Table 7: Top Five Improved Exits to Permanent Housing from Suburban and Urban Rapid Rehousing

County or Region	7/1/2016-6/30/2017	7/1/2017-6/30/2018	% Change
Pierce County	62.0%	88.0%	+26.0
Benton and Franklin counties	68.8%	81.0%	+12.2
Snohomish County	62.0%	73.0%	+11.0
Cowlitz County	68.9%	79.5%	+10.5
Yakima County	69.9%	76.3%	+6.4

Innovative Strategies to Improve System Performance

RCW 43.185C.040(1)(d) directs the plan to include “New or innovative funding, program, or service strategies to pursue.” Every community has different resources, strengths, challenges and needs to take community-specific actions to improve performance results. However, some high-impact strategies can improve performance in all communities.

The strategies detailed below are broad and regarded as best practices in homeless housing services. The Consolidated Homeless Grant supports all strategies listed below as a requirement or allowable activity.

Table 8: Best Practice Strategies for Improvement

Best Practice Strategies	Prioritizing Unsheltered Homeless Households	Increasing Exits to Permanent Housing	Reducing Returns to Homelessness	Reducing Length of Time Homeless
Lower barriers to coordinated entry processes	✓	✓		✓
Lower barriers to project entry	✓	✓		✓
Link street outreach to coordinated entry processes	✓	✓		✓
Use problem-solving strategies to divert people from entering the system	✓	✓	✓	✓
Deploy progressive engagement service models system-wide		✓	✓	✓
Provide housing-focused case management; focus on rehousing as the primary system goal		✓	✓	✓
Lower barriers to project participation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Provide housing search and placement services		✓	✓	✓
Target homelessness prevention assistance to those most likely to become homeless			✓	

Current Drivers of Homelessness

RCW 43.185C.040(1)(e) directs Commerce to include “an analysis of either current drivers of homelessness or improvements to housing security, or both, such as increases and reductions to employment opportunities, housing scarcity and affordability, health and behavioral health services, chemical dependency treatment, and incarceration rates.”

After eight years of steady improvement, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Washington began to increase in 2013. After examining potential drivers of the upward trend, it appears growing rents are overwhelmingly responsible for pushing people living at the margins into homelessness.

This section examines the potential causes of the increase to help inform solutions that could reverse this trend. The section also examines other generally perceived causes and provides information about their relationships to homelessness.

Increasing Rents Are the Main Driver of Increases in Homelessness

National research shows a connection between rent increases and homelessness. A \$100 increase in rent is associated with a 6% to 32% increase in homelessness.¹³

Rents have increased sharply since 2012, and not just in the Puget Sound corridor. Statewide average monthly rents increased \$111 between 2012 and 2015 (from \$838 to \$949), a 16% increase.

Rent increases were most pronounced in urban centers such as King County, which saw increases of \$250 in average monthly rents, from \$978 to \$1,228, a 26% increase. More rural areas have seen rent increases as well. For example, Chelan County saw rents increase by 8%.

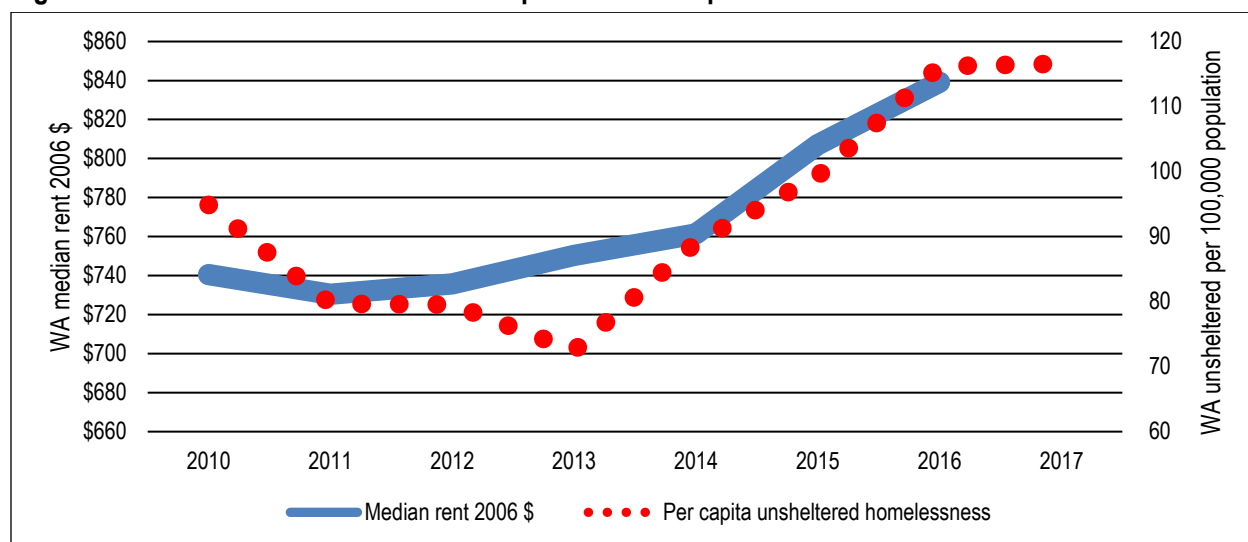
[Figure 1](#) shows changes in median rents in Washington compared to changes in the per capita rate of unsheltered homelessness versus median rent.

The associated issue of very low vacancy rates exacerbates problems rent increases cause, making it difficult for people to find a unit even when they have sufficient income or rental assistance to pay market rents. In Washington, the vacancy rate was 3.3% in 2016 and even lower in some urban areas.

[Table 9](#) compares rental vacancy rates between select Washington counties, U.S. states and major U.S. cities.

¹³ Byrne et al, Journal of Urban Affairs, “New Perspectives on Community-Level Determinants of Homelessness,” (2012), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9906.2012.00643.x>
Glynn, C., Fox E., “Dynamics of homelessness in urban America,” (2017), <https://arxiv.org/abs/1707.09380v1>

Figure 1: Median Rent in 2006 Dollars Compared to Per Capita Rate of Unsheltered Homelessness



Source for Rent U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey one-year estimates for Washington state, table B25058, inflation-adjusted using Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U Source for unsheltered homelessness rate: Washington state point-in-time count, divided by the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey one-year population estimate for Washington state.

Table 9: Comparison of Select Rental Vacancy Rates

Jurisdiction	2010	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017
United States	8.2%	6.8%	6.3%	5.9%	5.9%	6.2%
California	5.9%	4.5%	3.9%	3.3%	3.3%	3.5%
Massachusetts	5.8%	4.5%	4.0%	3.5%	4.0%	3.9%
Oregon	5.6%	4.7%	3.6%	3.6%	3.2%	3.8%
Texas	10.6%	8.5%	7.3%	7.0%	7.7%	8.5%
Washington	5.8%	5.3%	4.2%	3.3%	3.2%	3.7%
Clark County	8.2%	3.4%	2.4%	2.2%	3.0%	3.7%
Clallam County	11.4%	11.3%	6.1%	3.5%	1.8%	3.2%
King County	5.2%	4.1%	2.5%	2.6%	2.7%	3.5%
Pierce County	6.6%	5.4%	5.7%	3.3%	2.0%	4.7%
Spokane County	4.0%	7.2%	5.5%	3.7%	3.7%	2.4%
Yakima County	3.1%	4.5%	5.1%	3.6%	2.2%	2.3%
Whatcom County	3.9%	5.5%	4.1%	1.8%	1.8%	2.6%
Thurston County	4.0%	5.5%	5.9%	3.5%	4.7%	4.3%
Seattle	4.0%	3.5%	1.2%	2.7%	2.5%	3.9%
San Francisco	4.4%	2.8%	2.5%	2.5%	3.0%	3.5%
Atlanta	16.4%	8.6%	9.3%	6.6%	6.4%	7.6%
Houston	15.9%	11.2%	7.2%	7.7%	7.7%	10.4%

Note on color gradations: Red colored cells indicate low vacancy rates. Green colored cells indicate higher vacancy rates.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey one-year estimates, Table DP04

Increasing Rents Impede Progress on Reducing Homelessness

The rent-driven increase in the number of people becoming homeless appears to have overwhelmed the homeless housing system investments that have been in place since 2012. State and local governments acknowledge that additional investments and system improvements are critical. However, soaring rents make net progress more difficult by both increasing the number of people needing homeless housing and increasing the cost of each housing intervention. Addressing the causes of rent increases is a critical part of reducing the count of people experiencing homelessness.

Family Stability and Composition Have Been Stable Since 2012

It is generally believed that family breakups and conflict can lead to crises; most two-parent households have higher incomes than single-parent households, and having children before adulthood can jeopardize family stability. In Washington, all of these factors have been stable or improving since 2012 and, therefore, do not appear to be drivers of the increase in homelessness.

Employment Levels and Earned Incomes Are Improving

Since 2012, the percentage of the state's population that is employed has been increasing, and middle- and lower-quartile household earned incomes increased more than in most states. This above-average performance in employment and earned income indicates that these issues are not primary factors in the disproportionate increase in homelessness in Washington state.

Opioid Use Increased in Washington but Less than in Areas Where Homelessness Decreased

In the United States as a whole, unsheltered homelessness has declined since 2012, while opiate use has increased faster and to a higher level than in Washington.¹⁴ A small negative correlation exists between the prevalence of opioid use in a state and the prevalence of homelessness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control, "Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 1999-2016,"

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db294.htm>

Centers for Disease Control, "Increases in Drug and Opioid-Involved Overdose Deaths – United States, 2010-2015,"

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/wr/mm655051e1.htm>

Centers for Disease Control, "Drug Overdose Death Data,"

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html>

U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, "HUD Annual Homeless Assessment Report AHAR,"

<https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/ahar/#2017-reports>

¹⁵ Centers for Disease Control, "Increases in Drug and Opioid-Involved Overdose Deaths – United States, 2010-

2015" <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/wr/mm655051e1.htm>

U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "2016-17 NSDUH State Prevalence Estimates,"

<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2016-2017-nsduh-state-prevalence-estimates>

U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, "HUD Annual Homeless Assessment Report AHAR,"

<https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/ahar/#2017-reports>

Although substance-use disorders can lead to homelessness, Washington has seen a proportionately smaller increase in the problem while experiencing a disproportionately higher increase in homelessness, indicating that an increase in opioid dependence is not a primary driver of the increase in homelessness in the state.

Washington Homeless Crisis Response System Performance

Ensuring that the homeless crisis response system efficiently moves people from homelessness into stable, permanent housing is central to Washington’s effort to reduce homelessness. Washington’s homeless crisis response system ranks ninth in the country, outperforming 41 other states, in the performance areas of length of time homeless, exits to permanent housing and returns to homelessness for clients receiving services.¹⁶

This apparently above-average per-person-served performance indicates that poor performance is not the cause of increased homelessness in Washington since 2012. This newly released 2017 benchmarking data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is likely imperfect but is the best state-level measure of system performance currently available.

Washington is committed to using and refining as needed, meaningful measures of system performance, and related benchmarks to guide the evaluation of homeless crisis response investments.

¹⁶ U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, “2017 HUD System Performance Data,” <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5691/system-performance-measures-data-since-fy-2015/>

Appendix A: Listening Tours

In spring 2019, Commerce sought feedback from people with lived experience of homelessness by conducting listening tours in four cities across the state. Commerce held the events in Spokane, Yakima, Aberdeen and Mount Vernon. The Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (WLIHA) connected Commerce with its emerging advocates¹⁷ and Resident Action Project¹⁸ members to facilitate the events. All facilitators had current or recent lived experience of homelessness.

The listening tours focused on two questions:

1. What can the state do to end homelessness?
2. What is getting in the way of ending homelessness?

This appendix shares the results, including opportunities to incorporate the feedback to support effective homeless crisis response systems.

Personal stories shared at each session underscored the layered barriers that can keep people from self-sufficiency.

According to one listening tour participant, “When the most vulnerable of us thrive, we all thrive.”

What We Learned

People with lived experience of homelessness have expert ideas on how to solve their homelessness situations and move them toward more stable housing.

What Is Getting in the Way?

Overarching themes emerged from participant responses. The most prevalent response to “what’s getting in the way” was about how local communities treated people experiencing homelessness. Respondents cited bias, negative attitudes, and a lack of compassion and understanding among their housed neighbors.

While discussing some of the negative perceptions surrounding homelessness, one participant stated, “You have a body. It has to go somewhere.” Participants expressed the need for day centers where they could meet basic needs. Communities often lack places to shower, do laundry, connect with peers or rest. Simply knowing where to exist safely in a community is essential.

¹⁷ Washington Low Income Housing Alliance, *Emerging Advocates Program*, <https://www.wliha.org/EAP>

¹⁸ Resident Action Project, *Resident Action Project*, <https://residentactionproject.org/>

Many participants spoke of NIMBY-ism (Not In My Back Yard), defined as the opposition to affordable housing projects or housing services based on assumptions about the populations served by such projects. Even though community members might know a need for additional services exists, many residents want those services out of sight, less visible or not built at all. Attitudes and beliefs are powerful and can hinder communities' ability to increase resources. Ultimately, this stifling of solutions impacts people experiencing homelessness the most.

Lack of affordable housing options and employment opportunities were the second-most-cited common obstacles. A shortage of housing options is evident across the state, including in the communities where Commerce gathered feedback. The important relationship between housing availability and employment options is apparent. One participant explained that after gaining employment, he was hopeful about finding a rental. His housing search was frustrating, though, because he couldn't find a rental he could afford. He continued to work and live in a shelter. But when his employer found out he was homeless, he was let go.

Many participants emphasized they were once housed and employed and never thought they would be living in a shelter or on the streets. None of them planned or wanted to be homeless.

What Can Washington Do?

Growth in current services and the capacity to create new ones were recommended actions the state should take to address homelessness. Participants specifically mentioned increasing the number of:

- Current housing services
- Affordable housing units
- Temporary housing options
- Outreach services to help people get, and stay, connected

These suggestions have been echoed across the state as well as nationally.

The obstacles we face in bringing everyone inside are immense:

- Rental vacancy rates remain unhealthy.
- New affordable housing units do not get built quickly enough to meet the existing need.
- NIMBY-ism suppresses creative solutions.
- Misinformation fuels bias toward those experiencing homelessness.

According to the feedback, the state's approach must be multi-faceted and involve all systems. Commerce will continue pursuing feedback from those with lived experience to ensure the agency stays connected to those most impacted by its policies and programming.

Appendix B: Scope of Homeless Housing Strategic Plan

Focusing Limited Homeless Housing Funding and Planning Resources to House People Who Are Literally Homeless

The most direct way to address adult homelessness in most cases is to provide people with housing or enough money to afford housing. In some cases, people also need supportive services to maintain housing due to behavioral or physical health needs that preclude fully independent living.

Homeless housing providers have a responsibility to link people as appropriate to mainstream services to improve employment and earnings, address behavioral health, and improve family linkages and stability. However, as described below, investments in these types of services beyond what is broadly available to people regardless of their housing status, do not appear to reduce homelessness significantly. Therefore, they are not the most efficient use of the limited funds tied to the outcome of reducing the count of homeless persons.

Preventing homelessness, or “working upstream,” can be an effective way to reduce homelessness but only at a significantly higher spending level than what is currently in place in Washington. Reducing homelessness through upstream prevention and increased collaboration would circumvent the traumatic experience of not having a home. But given available resources and existing knowledge about intervention effectiveness for the current and foreseeable future, the most effective use of funding tied to reducing the count of homeless persons is providing housing for people literally experiencing homelessness.

Through the Interagency Council on Homelessness, state agencies continue to pursue cross-agency system improvements that could help prevent homelessness. The agencies have dedicated resources in 2019-21 to conduct additional research on the effectiveness of promising prevention strategies with the hope that a new innovative prevention or collaboration strategy will prove to be more effective than strategies evaluated thus far.

Methods to Prevent Homelessness

Provide Subsidized Housing to All People with Low Incomes

Providing subsidized housing, either voucher or facility-based, to all people with low incomes would prevent the majority of homelessness in Washington. One study found that low-income families receiving housing vouchers were 74% (from 12.5% down to 3.3%) less likely to become homeless, with no significant long-term impacts on employment or earnings.¹⁹

¹⁹ Jacob et al, “The Impact of Housing Assistance on Child Outcomes: Evidence from a Randomized Housing Lottery,” (2015), <https://harris.uchicago.edu/files/inline-files/QJE%20housing%20vouchers%20and%20kid%20outcomes%202015.pdf>

Most Washington households with low incomes do not receive housing subsidies. Since most low-income households without housing subsidies do not become homeless, this is a relatively indirect and costly method to reduce homelessness. However, other benefits beyond reducing homelessness are associated with providing housing subsidies. Affordable housing and homeless housing investments in Washington are, in order of magnitude, too small to successfully deploy this strategy to reduce homelessness.

Provide Low-Income Households at Risk of Homelessness with Temporary Housing Subsidies

Since screening tools are imprecise, most of the people who screen as at-risk of imminent homelessness do not end up living unsheltered or in temporary homeless housing if not assisted. That means it is more cost-effective to house the smaller number of households that become literally homeless. For every 100 low-income families at imminent risk of homelessness, 2.2 families were prevented from needing to enter shelter. According to the study, spending \$100,000 on the prevention program prevented three households from entering shelter. In contrast, \$100,000 could have sheltered 417 families.²⁰

Increase Earned Income

“Welfare-to-work” and similar efforts to improve the earnings of people with low incomes in many cases do increase earned incomes and work participation. However, these efforts do not appear to increase incomes enough to meaningfully improve people’s ability to purchase housing, and they do not reduce the percentage of people living in shelters or other temporary housing. The most successful welfare-to-work program in the study increased annual income by \$374 per year.²¹

Employment services designed to link people to employment to increase earned income do not significantly reduce homelessness.²² More broadly, low-income households’ earned incomes are above the national average in Washington, as are work participation and educational attainment rates. Improving educational attainment and employment will continue to be a central component of homeless crisis responses, but improvements in these areas are unlikely to produce meaningful reductions in homelessness.

Treat Behavioral Health Illnesses

Treating behavioral health illnesses such as substance-use disorders and depression has proven to save lives and reduce public costs, but it does not appear to increase incomes enough to meaningfully improve people’s ability to purchase housing. Treatment of major depression increased lifetime earnings by \$1,523, and treatment for substance abuse increased lifetime

²⁰ Evans, Sullivan, Wallskog, “The impact of homelessness prevention programs on homelessness,” *Science Magazine*, (August 12, 2016), Volume 353, <https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Impact-of-homelessness-prevention.pdf>

²¹ Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, “National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies,” (2001), page 137, https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_391.pdf

²² *Housing and employment navigator program evaluation*, June 2017, pages 43, 52 <https://workforcenavigator.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/wif-navigtor-full-report-7-19-17.pdf>

earnings by only \$1,239.²³ For example, drug courts and the associated substance-use-disorder treatment deliver positive outcomes, but they do not significantly increase incomes or reduce homelessness.²⁴ Medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorder does not significantly reduce homelessness or housing instability.²⁵ However, in some cases, providing behavioral health supports is necessary to help people remain in stable housing.²⁶

Link Housing to More Intensive Services Intended to Improve Self-Sufficiency

Housing linked to more intensive services that are intended to improve self-sufficiency, such as those typically provided in transitional housing, do not appear to significantly increase long-term housing stability or self-sufficiency.²⁷

Housing Linked to Increased Cross-Agency Collaboration

Housing linked to increased cross-agency collaboration among public assistance, employment, and housing providers did not increase incomes or housing stability when compared to similar assistance with no additional collaboration.²⁸ However, cross-agency collaboration can be important to improve customer service and eliminate obvious inefficiencies.

Increase Family Stability

Increased family stability can boost incomes because households with multiple adults, in general, have higher incomes than single-adult households. Family stability in Washington is above average and improving, precluding the possibility of significant improvements in low

²³ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, “Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for schizophrenia/psychosis,” (2014, updated in 2018), <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/494>

Washington State Institute for Public Policy, “Contingency management (higher cost) for substance use disorders,” (2014, updated in 2018), <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/297>

²⁴ Rossman et al, “The Multi-Site Adult Drug Court Evaluation: The Impact of Drug Courts,” Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, (2011), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/27381/412357-The-Multi-site-Adult-Drug-Court-Evaluation-The-Impact-of-Drug-Courts.PDF>: “We found no differences in the rates of homelessness and in the average level of interest in receiving housing services between the drug court and comparison groups. These results remained stable between the 6- and 18-month marks.”

²⁵ Speaker et al, “Washington State Medication-assisted Treatment – Prescription Drug and Opioid Addiction Project, Preliminary Outcomes through Year Two,” (2019),

<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SESA/rda/documents/research-4-102.pdf>

²⁶ Schutt et al, “Lessening homelessness among persons with mental illness: A comparison of Five Randomized Treatment Trials,” (2010), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2788308/>: “Findings indicate that housing availability was the primary predictor of subsequent ability to avoid homelessness, while enhanced services reduced the risk of homelessness if housing was also available.”

²⁷ “Family Options Study 3-Year Impacts on Housing and Services Interventions for Homeless Families,” (2016), p. 72, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Family-Options-Study-Full-Report.pdf>

²⁸ Ibid.

incomes through broad improvements in family stability.²⁹ There is no evidence that programs to increase marriage stability are effective.³⁰

Reduce Market-Rate Housing Costs

Reducing market-rate housing costs could reduce homelessness because communities with higher rents have higher levels of homelessness. Rent levels are strongly associated with median incomes. Rents in Washington are 6% higher than income alone would predict, according to Commerce’s analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data. That could indicate problems with the housing supply, which might be related to land-use regulation.

Bringing Washington rents down to the level predicted by median incomes, and bringing Washington’s homelessness rate down to the national average relationship between rent and homelessness, would result in a 27% reduction in homelessness. Ensuring that land-use regulation allows an adequate supply of housing could reduce some of the recent increases in homelessness but would be insufficient to address the bulk of the problem.

Increase Law Enforcement Response to Homelessness

There is no evidence that the arrest and incarceration of people experiencing homelessness increase their post-arrest income or housing stability. Law enforcement can address disruptive behaviors and public health concerns and may be able to displace homelessness from one area to another. Treatment provided while incarcerated is effective,³¹ but there is no evidence that treatment while incarcerated meaningfully increases earned income and housing stability after release. Drug courts are effective at reducing substance use, but these improvements do not significantly increase earned incomes or reduce homelessness.³²

²⁹ United States Census Bureau, *American Community Survey Data*, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html>

Since 2012 in Washington, divorce, domestic violence and teenage pregnancy declined. The percentage of children in married-couple households increased - Washington ranked eighth, and the percentage of married-couple households increased – Washington ranked 14th.

³⁰ Lundquist et al, “A Family-Strengthening Program for Low-Income Families – Final Impacts from the Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation,” (2014), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/shm2013_30_month_impact_reportrev2.pdf

³¹ Topcuoglu, Tuba, “Effectiveness of Prison-Based Drug Treatment Programs: A Systematic Review of Meta-Analyses,” (2016), http://addicta.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2016.3.0005_eng.pdf

³² Rossman et al, “The Multi-Site Adult Drug Court Evaluation”