ENDING HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS IN MAINE

A White Paper by the Maine Statewide Homeless Council

ABSTRACT

This White Paper describes how to address the growing problem of homeless encampments in Maine. It explains the historical and policy context that gave rise to encampments and provides a policy and practitioner roadmap for ending them.

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Executive Summary

Maine is experiencing a surge in the number of people trying to survive outside. There is no substitute for simple, decent and affordable housing. But Maine is facing a gap of 84,000 affordable homes over the next decade. Without an adequate supply of accessible emergency shelter and permanent housing, we will continue to see a rise in the number of people sleeping outside in Maine.

This is not the way life should be, and we must invest in interim solutions to address this crisis. A large body of research confirms that unsheltered homelessness shortens lives through accident, illness, and victimization. To address these problems, many communities have adopted an "out of sight, out of mind" approach, clearing people out of the places they have been camping as if it will lead to better outcomes.

It does not. But that doesn't mean Maine can't get there. This paper sets out recommendations for an effective response to the difficult issue of unsheltered homelessness. Using a case study model, it highlights the success of Waterville, a small New England college town located in a rural county in central Maine, and the small city of Biddeford, both of which successfully used these strategies to end or significantly reduce outdoor homelessness. Their response to unsheltered homelessness highlights key principles and provides a roadmap for other Maine communities. These principles include:

1. Committed leadership
2. Housing First
3. Focus on prevention
4. Accessible, professional shelter
5. Targeted use of resources
6. Relying on real-time data

By adopting these principles, communities across Maine can respond compassionately and efficiently to one of the state's most acute public crises.

Introduction

The Maine homeless system has historically been able to shelter most unhoused Mainers. While there have been waitlists and nightly "turn-aways", over the last fifteen years, upwards of 98% of Maine's unhoused population has found a safe place to sleep within a Maine shelter[1].

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, rental vacancy rates have dropped precipitously creating an affordable housing crisis. According to a report issued by MaineHousing and the Governor's Office of Policy, Innovation, and the Future published in October 2023, Maine requires approximately 84,000 units of housing to meet current and future demand. Critically, approximately 26,000 units must be affordable for households at or below 30% Area Median

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[1] HMIS data combined with Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence data annually summarized by MaineHousing.

Income (AMI)[2]. This lack of affordable housing has led to increased demand for shelter and significantly longer periods of homelessness (lengths of stay in homelessness).

Because of chronic underfunding, Maine's permanent supply of shelter beds has not increased in response to this demand and as a result, many people have turned to surviving outside in encampments. While providing nominal benefits like mutual aid and fellowship, encampments are nonetheless demonstrably unsafe at best, and at their worst, deadly. According to a review of 33 separate studies, victimization, and street crime are pervasive for people unsheltered: the risk of assault is 11 times greater than the general population (Ellsworth, 2019). People in encampments face a rate of robbery that is 12 times greater, and theft is 20 times greater (Ellsworth, 2019). Being unhoused (rather than merely inadequately housed) is associated with a 3.5 times increased mortality risk compared to poverty alone (Serchen, et al, 2024). These risks are not shared equally. People with substance use disorder, and mental illness, and people who have been turned away from shelter are at much higher risk, as well as women, seniors, and people of color who are disproportionately affected by housing insecurity and homelessness.

Crime is not the only threat faced by people who are unsheltered. According to a national meta-analysis, unsheltered community members experience higher rates of chronic disease, serious mental illness, and substance abuse than sheltered populations. Unsheltered homelessness is also strongly associated with chronic homelessness which exacerbates serious mental illness and substance use (Richards & Kuhn, 2022). According to Maine Drug Data, in 2023, people experiencing homelessness were 32 times more likely to die of a fatal overdose than their counterparts in the general population.[3] Despite having large unmet health needs, unsheltered populations have lower healthcare utilization, often lack health insurance, and are unable to address these issues without assistance (Richards & Kuhn, 2022).

It is important to note that forcing people to move out of encampments when they have no feasible place to go puts lives at risk. According to a 2023 study published in the Journal of American Medicine, repeated encampment sweeps result in an increase in the number of people who inject drugs, and a mortality increase between 15.6–24.4% over ten years for this same population (Barocas, et al).

This paper endorses the principle that all people must have access to shelter or housing if camping bans are contemplated for reasons of public safety. This is not only the only ethical solution to the problem, but it also is the most effective. According to data from the Department of Housing & Urban Development, the overall return to homelessness rates for people exiting emergency shelter at 6, 12, and 24 months is 12%, 17%, and 22%, respectively (Tsai & Burns, 2023). Compare that to prison recidivism where Department of Justice data demonstrates that 43% of formerly incarcerated individuals are rearrested within one year of release (Lahdon, 2023).

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[2] AMI = Area Median Income. AMI is dependent on household size. In 2024 per HUD data, 30% AMI for a family of four is $24,700-38,250, Franklin to Cumberland, lowest to highest annual adjusted income. For a family of one, the corresponding numbers are $17,300-26,800.

[3] 2023 Maine data: 607 fatal ODs within overall population of 1.396M, 73 (12%) were within 6000 people homeless

Background

There is no universal definition of an encampment, but they are commonly understood to be semi-permanent tent communities comprised of people unhoused. Until recently, these kinds of communities were a problem consigned to history. Few are alive today who remember the "Hoovervilles" (named for Republican president Herbert Hoover) of the Great Depression. Hoovervilles were notable not only for their size but also their demographics because, in addition to single men, Hoovervilles also included large numbers of older people and households with children. FDR's New Deal and a post-war economic and housing boom returned most Hooverville residents to housing and unsheltered homelessness was largely unheard of in much of the United States for several decades.

Homelessness re-emerged as an issue of national concern in the 1980s because of significant changes to housing policy and investments, along with changes in the labor market, gentrification, reductions in social welfare, and the closure of many psychiatric hospitals. Homelessness accelerated again in the early decades of the 21st century in response to failed social welfare policy. Contrary to common belief, the rise in encampments in the 21st century did not begin with the Great Recession (Herring & Lutz, 2015). Tent villages were already on the rise, a product of bi-partisan welfare restructuring and penal policies that emerged as far back as the 1980s and accelerated during the late 1990s and early 2000 boom years (Herring & Lutz, 2015).

The seemingly inexorable rise of unhoused tent communities began to trouble many West Coast cities beginning at the turn of the 21st century when housing prices began to exceed the ability to pay of most low-wage workers. Today the problem is so acute that many encampments are perceived by some civic leaders as a cost-effective way to manage exclusionary orders that drive people who have been unhoused for long periods (described as "chronically homeless" in federal regulations) from prime commercial and residential zones (Loftus-Farren, 2014). This orientation is notable in communities with "problem-oriented policing" where encampments are viewed by the unhoused as "safe havens" from law enforcement. From this perspective, encampments serve a dual purpose, both encouraging unhoused people to leave trendy business and residential districts and "move along" to places that are less desirable with greater opportunities for containment, while also providing nominal dignity to people in places where human dignity is not a priority (Herring & Lutz, 2015).

Twenty-first-century encampments also emerged in the pre-Housing First era where access to shelter, housing services, and subsidies was predicated on "housing readiness" (Herring & Lutz, 2015). Since the advent of Housing First as a national best practice, some cities have seen a reduction in the number and size of encampments despite seeing growth in the total number of unhoused people (Herring & Lutz, 2015).

Maine adopted Housing First as a statewide strategy to end chronic homelessness in 2023 with the passage of LD2 with funding provided through the governor's supplemental budget. The state hopes to house approximately 400 chronically homeless people through Housing First over the next ten years. While ambitious, the Housing First initiative must operate in conjunction with an efficient homeless services system.

Maine

Researchers have investigated how to best serve people in encampments. Much of that research has focused on encampments on the West Coast and in the southern United States, areas with relatively mild weather conditions where outdoor survival is less an issue than in areas with more severe temperatures and weather, like Maine. The nation's 40-year homeless response has reflected these differences as well. In Los Angeles, for example, annual PIT count data shows that on any given night some 36,000 people experience homelessness, and only 10% of people are served by homeless shelters. The other 90% exist outdoors, staying on the streets, in cars, or makeshift encampments.

In contrast, Maine's homeless response has been built around the concept that outdoor survival is manifestly unsafe due to extreme temperatures and weather events. As a result, Maine created and has maintained a robust emergency shelter network which, before the pandemic, ensured that 95-98% of Maine's homeless population were served at some point in homeless shelters, with just 2-5% of unhoused people attempting to survive outdoors. The HMIS average over the six years before the pandemic suggests 200 people were unsheltered or 3.3% of the combined population, typically in scattered outdoor living sites rather than clustered in encampments.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point in Maine. Social distancing required the depopulation of congregate shelters in favor of non-congregate hotels. In addition, federal and state eviction moratoriums significantly reduced the number of people evicted into homelessness. It also reduced the number of units coming onto the rental market making it difficult to help people exit from shelters. Pre-pandemic, many shelters were able to rehouse 50-80% of their guests every month; that number dropped to approximately 1% in some communities in the wake of the pandemic. Today, the shelter system has a 6-7% housing placement pattern that persists to this day due in part to a rental affordability crisis stemming from a significant shortage in the number of affordable rental units in all parts of the state[4].

Without a sufficient supply of affordable housing and rental assistance, there is no swift exit from shelter for thousands of Mainers. Even with the assistance of Housing Navigators, who help people conduct housing searches, apply for rental subsidies, and engage with landlords, there are too few affordable units, even fewer housing vouchers (rental assistance), and too many landlords who will not accept either vouchers or potential tenants who do not appear at face value to be "good tenants" because of an eviction, criminal conviction, or other scars on their housing record.

The result is a stuck homeless response system with inflow but very little outflow. With no permanent increase in shelter funding to expand the number of beds available to meet demand, more and more homeless households are forced to live outside.

Data

Although unduplicated homeless numbers have not increased significantly in the last decade, average lengths of stay in shelters have increased dramatically through 2023, the first full year post-pandemic without federal relief funding. To illustrate using data from the Mid-

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[4] Maine Continuum of Care Systems Performance data as compiled by MaineHousing.

Maine Homeless Shelter & Services in Waterville, in 2019 the average length of stay and the mode (the most frequently occurring number in the data set) was 41 days and 4 days, respectively. This increased in 2023 to 110/365. This means in practice that a shelter bed that served as many as 40 people in a single calendar year now serves one or two people. Shelters are full and people in crisis are being turned away.

With no place to go, 2023 brought an unprecedented tripling of unsheltered homelessness in Maine. Whereas Maine's annual Point in Time count revealed 300 people unsheltered in January 2023, by December 2023, local estimates suggested there were some 900 people unsheltered across the state with approximately 300 people in Sanford alone, a town with essentially no unsheltered homelessness in previous years.[5] With an estimated 6000 people homeless in 2023, Maine's unsheltered count grew to 15% of its homeless population, nearly a quintupling of the percentage of people outside before the pandemic.[6]

The problem is even more acute during the summer months when alternatives to camping, like winter warming shelters, are unavailable. Although no formal count is made during the summer months, local communities report a massive surge from late spring through late fall with numbers as much as three times higher than counted in January.

Central Maine Case Study

Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter & Services (MMHSS) is located in Waterville, a small city of just 16,000 people in a rural county that is home to Maine's 4th highest homeless population as well as the state capital. It also implemented the core interventions of committed leadership, Housing First principles, prevention, professional shelter, and the targeted use of resources; as a result, Waterville's unsheltered population dropped from an estimated 100 people in October 2023 to 0 by mid-January 2024.

Waterville's success was based on six key factors:

1. MMHSS is the only shelter in the state committed to a policy of turning no one away between November 1 and April 30. Leadership was able to set this expectation by making sure staff had the tools they needed to implement such a radical policy. This policy allowed outreach workers to encourage people to come inside and law enforcement to set clear timetables for enforcing the city's no-camping ordinance. This policy required MMHSS staff to adopt a flexible "can do" approach to utilizing space.

2. MMHSS committed to fully embracing Housing First which at its core is about reducing barriers to housing, permanent or otherwise. With the affordable housing supply at an all-time low in Waterville, MMHSS focused on lowering barriers to shelter and in 2022 became the first low-barrier shelter in the state to welcome pets, reduce overdoses through an innovative approach to risk stratification, and creatively use space to allow heterosexual couples to bunk next to each other.

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[5] Estimates from local officials including outreach workers and municipal authorities.
[6] FY 23 HMIS number was 5207 and adding 900 additional unique individuals estimated unsheltered produces that estimate.

3. MMHSS was supported financially by the City of Waterville and Kennebec County governments who allocated necessary ARPA funding to sustain shelter operations. MMHSS also received an additional grant from MaineHousing to operate an overnight warming center. This strategic use of resources allowed MMHSS to provide adequate staffing for their shelter programs, which is essential to creating a safe and welcoming environment for guests and employees alike.

4. MMHSS focused on prevention and utilized several grants to reduce the inflow to shelter. These grants included funding for Diversion to help people avoid losing their housing, and Rapid Rehousing which targets resources and relies on dedicated landlord engagement to return eligible households to permanent housing as quickly as possible.

5. Finally, MMHSS established a Homeless Response Task Force which met every two weeks through the first half of the winter and included homeless service providers from across the city and municipal leaders to review data and coordinate around anticipated seasonal surges in demand for emergency shelter. Leaders included the mayor of Waterville, the chair of the city council, state representatives to the Maine legislature, as well as the chiefs of the Waterville fire and police departments. These leaders were able to quickly identify gaps, eliminate system barriers, and coordinate resources for a highly effective multi-agency collaboration.

6. Without a professional shelter workforce, none of the above would have been possible. MMHSS focused on training and developing a highly skilled workforce and all staff were trained in mental health first aid, administration of Narcan, Harm Reduction, First Aid/CPR/AED, de-escalation, and setting and maintaining boundaries. Staff were then able to use risk stratification principles to address the needs of guests based on need rather than noise.

Biddeford Case Study

Biddeford is a small city of just 22,500 people in the southernmost county of York. In 2023, Biddeford saw an emergence of people outside, with some counts suggesting there were 200 people unsheltered, culminating in one entrenched encampment with 58-60 people near the Saco River downtown by the end of the winter of 2024. In early April 2024, city leaders were developing a plan to sanction some sort of encampment, but they would have had to relocate it due to some work required on the physical site; that site needed to be empty by a looming date.

They changed strategies when provided best practice information drawn from successful work in Portland and Waterville in bringing people into shelters. Biddeford leaders, including the mayor, the city manager, and the chief of police along with the city council ultimately decided to work with an area shelter, Seeds of Hope, which agreed to open space for the occupants of the encampment in exchange for funding support from the city. Local officials worked with people outside to move each person inside over the course of the next two months.

This was not without challenges, but by the closure date of July 8th, all the people in the encampment moved into shelter, and the city hired a long-time outreach worker to serve as their Director of General Assistance (GA) to begin working to coordinate efforts to house them. The GA office began working on site at the shelter and created weekly collaborative service provider huddles focused on who was doing what to house each person in the shelter. Thirty people moved from shelter into permanent housing in the first five months (July to December 2024). Only a few people have emerged temporarily in tents since the encampment was resolved and the City has worked to bring them into shelter as well.

Promising Solutions

The success in Waterville and Biddeford can be replicated and sustained but it will require municipal and state leaders to invest time and resources into the effort to achieve realistic targets:

1. Leadership and funding lead to accountability. Waterville accessed state and local funding, including state HOME funds and local ARPA funding, as well as private grants and philanthropy to ensure the shelter could accommodate dozens of people leaving encampments. In both locations, local leadership, including municipal and nonprofit leaders, set targets and stayed laser-focused on achieving them, and to working in collaboration despite differences that naturally exist in multi-sector and multi-agency partnerships.

2. Housing First is an evidence-based best practice, and it works. Returning to permanent housing should be the goal for every interaction between people experiencing homelessness and service providers (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2012). Housing First is based upon the idea that housing is linked to stability services. Services must include harm reduction and crisis support. Although Maine faces a significant supply-side deficit, these communities invested heavily in landlord engagement, Rapid Rehousing, and Targeted Case Management, to help move people directly from encampments into apartments, transition people from shelter to housing as quickly as possible and provide follow-up services to keep those housing placements stable.

3. Reduce inflow to shelters through statewide prevention programs that provide housing problem solving conversations, rental stability funding, and other time-limited financial and case management assistance to keep people in stable housing.

4. Invest in Maine's shelters as the backbone of the system. Waterville relied on professionally run shelters to provide the backbone of their strategies to close encampments. Biddeford worked with what was a warming shelter to help them expand their capacity and ability to serve a larger population. Given our harsh winters, all Mainers must have access to professionally run, year-round shelters. Seasonal-only shelters do not offer the same results for returning people to housing because they do not provide the supportive services to transition people to housing and help keep them there.

5. Target shelter funding to all shelters in areas of high need, including low barrier shelters in areas of high need and ensure adequate funding for low barrier shelters and shelters for special populations (e.g. people with substance use disorder, families, youth, domestic violence survivors, and the older populations). This can be achieved through strategic partnerships and further investment in existing shelters.

Conclusion

Effective and efficient homeless response is rooted in effective and committed leadership, housing, supportive services, and safe shelter when housing is not immediately available. It makes sense for Maine's response to unsheltered homelessness to be rooted in the same principles. As the case studies suggest, Maine should work to move people into housing from encampments and if housing is not immediately available, into safe shelter with services focused on people securing stable housing as efficiently as possible. Waterville and Biddeford have demonstrated that most people will move from unsheltered settings into low barrier shelter and from there into housing. Both communities accomplished this without criminalizing homelessness.

This paper recommends these best practices be adopted across the state. This will require that emergency shelter space is available for every person who needs it, and that services are delivered to each person such that they can obtain and retain housing. Maine is expanding its outreach services to bring people into housing and shelter, and that is also a proper response to unsheltered homelessness.

Sweeps with no alternative accommodation that result in fines and criminalization do not solve unsheltered homelessness; relationships and welcoming shelter do. Maine can and should insist that everyone deserves to sleep inside at night. That belief should drive policy that commits the resources necessary to address unsheltered homelessness.

This is an emergency we must solve together.

Definitions

Continuum of Care: The Continuum of Care (CoC) Program is established in federal regulations (see 24 CFR part 578) and is designed to promote a community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness; to provide funding for efforts by nonprofit providers, states, Indian Tribes or tribally designated housing entities, and local governments to quickly rehouse homeless individuals and families, while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused by homelessness. It promotes access to and effective utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families and optimizes self-sufficiency among those experiencing homelessness. Maine has a whole of state continuum of care referred to as the MCOC.

Encampment: Two or more unrelated people camping together on an ongoing basis in temporary structures or enclosed places that are not intended for long-term continuous occupancy.

Functional Zero Homelessness: There will always be people who lose their housing and must rely on a social safety net. Functional zero is a milestone that must be sustained and indicates a community has measurably solved homelessness for a given sub-population (e.g. veterans). When it's achieved, homelessness is rare and brief for that population.

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS): HMIS is a local information technology system used to collect client-level data and data on the provision of housing and services to individuals and families at risk of and experiencing homelessness. Each CoC is responsible for selecting an HMIS software solution that complies with HUD's data collection, management, and reporting standards.

Point in Time Count: The Point-in-Time (PIT) Count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. HUD requires that CoCs conduct an annual count of people experiencing homelessness who are sheltered in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night. CoCs also must conduct a count of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness every other year (odd-numbered years). Each count is planned, coordinated, and carried out locally.

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