

A Report by a Working Group of the
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Reducing Homelessness in the United States: An Intergovernmental Challenge



September 2024

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National Academy of Public Administration

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About the Academy

The National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) is an independent, nonprofit, and non-partisan organization established in 1967 and chartered by Congress in 1984. It provides expert advice to government leaders in building more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. To carry out this mission, the Academy draws on the knowledge and experience of its approximately 1,000 Fellows—including former cabinet officers, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, state legislators, prominent scholars, career public administrators, and nonprofit and business executives. The Academy helps public institutions address their most critical governance and management challenges through in-depth studies and analyses, advisory services and technical assistance, congressional testimony, forums and conferences, and online stakeholder engagement. Learn more about the Academy and its work at www.NAPAwash.org.

About the Standing Panel on Intergovernmental Systems

The Standing Panel on Intergovernmental Systems convenes experts on intergovernmental systems to discuss problem identification, researchable questions, development and review of actionable recommendations, and advocacy for Congress and the nation on policy changes. The Panel members and invited expert researchers analyze intergovernmental challenges and meet with decision makers and staff to improve intergovernmental designs, policies, and delivery of benefits and services. The desired outcome of the Panel's work is to develop actionable recommendations for the Academy's Center for Intergovernmental Partnerships and to mobilize and implement thought leadership. Our objective is to develop the intergovernmental actions needed to address the "Grand Challenges" facing the nation—creating the partnerships required to deal with the 21st century's increasing complexity.

Foreword

This report is the product of many months of exploration and deliberation by a group of Academy Fellows who raised their hands in response to a call from Mark Pisano and Shelley Metzenbaum, co-chairs Standing Panel on the Intergovernmental Systems, to focus on the challenge of homelessness.

The approach taken by the group is distinctive in several ways. First, rather than responding to a specific request, these volunteers chose to focus on the intergovernmental dimensions of homelessness because of a shared interest in addressing a pressing societal problem. Second, the group decided to engage in depth with people who are working with the practical administrative challenges homelessness presents to communities across the country, and only then to develop tentative ideas for addressing those challenges. Third, rather than make definitive recommendations to agencies and leaders, the group chose a different approach – posing a series of leading questions to people at all levels in the intergovernmental system and inviting future research on these questions.

The resulting document constructs a foundation for further dialogue with practitioners and experts. It frames the complex, boundary-crossing problem of reducing homelessness as ‘inherently intergovernmental.’ It notes both ways the intergovernmental system has responded to this challenge and ways in which the structure of that system complicates the work of local people trying to fashion an agreement on and implement a strategy tailored to local circumstances. From the experience of communities that have had some measure of success, the report highlights a set of basic tasks that people in any locality need to undertake to make their efforts effective and sustainable. Finally, it presents a kind of ‘learning agenda’ for further inquiry and dialogue.

I believe that the work of this group represents a promising model for tackling a range of complex challenges that require intergovernmental collaboration in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions across functions and sectors. The next test of that model will be the responses of public and nonprofit actors to the ideas and questions it presents.

I extend my thanks to the members of the Standing Panel working group on homelessness and to the Academy’s Center for Intergovernmental Partnerships staff who supported their efforts. We seek to promote dialogue and research by encouraging everyone to read this report closely and look for ways to share it with others who can benefit from its ideas. We especially invite those who have been working for a long time to help prevent and reduce homelessness to engage with the Academy in a continuing conversation on ways to aid and accelerate their efforts.

Teresa W. Gerton

President and Chief Executive Officer
National Academy of Public Administration

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym or Abbreviation	Definition
Academy	National Academy of Public Administration
ARPA	American Rescue Plan Act
CFNCM	Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts
CFTH	Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County
CMHA	Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance
CMS	Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
CoC	Continuum of Care
CRD	Climate Resilience Districts Act
CRIA	Community Revitalization and Investment Authorities Act
CSAC	California State Association of Counties
EHV	Emergency Housing Voucher
EIFD	Enhanced Infrastructure Districts Act
EOHLC	Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities
HHS	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
HMIS	Homeless Information Management System
HUD	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
IMS/PIC	Inventory Management System/Public Housing Information Center
ISP	Intergovernmental Standing Panel
LIHTC	Low-Income Housing Tax Credit
PHA	Public Housing Authority
PFA	Public Finance Authority
SSA	U.S. Social Security Administration
SSDI	Social Security Disability Insurance
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
USICH	United States Interagency Council on Homelessness
VA	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Introduction

After a period of years during which many communities were able to reduce the number of people living without homes slowly, the latest statistics show the numbers of homeless people rising—not everywhere, but even in some places where substantial resources have been committed.¹ Other localities have continued to make progress.

The National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) recognized the importance of learning from these efforts to deepen the understanding needed for more effective actions. Varied jurisdictions have progressed through hard work under harsh conditions, including an intergovernmental system that challenges those trying to mount and sustain a coordinated local or regional response that requires effective collaboration among many actors across levels of government and sectors.

In places that have had a measure of success:

- Local leaders reached across geographic and functional boundaries to forge agreement on a shared goal and joint strategy to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness.
- Multiple actors then organized to deliver timely, integrated services, including housing assistance, which is effective in helping people find homes and, in some cases, prevents more people from experiencing homelessness.
- Local agencies have used data and analysis to plan and operate more effectively by refining, better targeting, and tracking their efforts.
- Leaders are working to build governing arrangements and secure stable funding that will allow them to sustain their efforts in the future.

Their positive experience provides insights and raises questions about how people working at all levels in the intergovernmental system and different sectors can better support more effective efforts everywhere to reduce homelessness. The last section of this paper poses a series of questions for further discussion and exploration by people at all levels of government. These questions also can help frame systematic future research about intergovernmental efforts to prevent and eliminate homelessness.

In 2022, a working group of a dozen Academy Fellows—formed by the Academy’s Standing Panel on Intergovernmental Systems, chaired by Shelley Metzenbaum and Mark Pisano—began researching the challenges facing communities nationwide trying to reduce homelessness within our intergovernmental system. The Academy’s Center on Intergovernmental Partnerships has supported these efforts. The contributing Fellows are listed on this report’s Contributors page.

¹ Nationally, based on point-in-time annual counts, homelessness declined from 2007 to 2016 by about 12 percent. However, it has since risen; in 2023, homelessness increased 12 percent from the year before to a record of more than 650,000 people (<https://www.perplexity.ai/search/changes-in-number-d4oVYskuTIGqvWsukC1vbQ>). There is wide variation across places in both rates and trends.

Our Purpose

With this paper, we seek to (1) identify efforts in various localities around the nation that have experienced some success in addressing the problem of homelessness, (2) highlight the intergovernmental dimensions of the problem and efforts to combat it, and (3) develop and communicate practical ideas, frameworks for action, and advice to support the efforts of many people working to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness.

The federal government has mounted a series of bipartisan initiatives to reduce homelessness, starting in the 1980s. Many originated in the [Stuart B. McKinney \(McKinney-Vento\) Act of 1987](#), signed during the Reagan Administration. Efforts have continued in succeeding Administrations,² with a focus on chronic homelessness beginning in the early 2000s and later a specific focus on reducing veteran homelessness. Most recently, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness³ (USICH) coordinated the development of a national strategy and [strategic plan](#) to prevent and end homelessness. It is undergirded by research findings showing that in many situations, a "housing first" strategy—helping those experiencing homelessness move into housing as a first step to addressing their needs—works better than providing services first. Most communities have pursued some version of this approach, following the federal government's lead, adapting it to local economic and housing market conditions, governance arrangements, the characteristics and dynamics of their homeless population, resource levels, and local choices about how to respond. Their success has varied widely. In our conversations with experts and leaders at all levels in the U.S. intergovernmental system, we have seen that no one size fits all.

The intergovernmental perspective offers a lens on the complexities of addressing homelessness as experienced in each community and the challenges of developing effective remedial responses. Homelessness is inherently an intergovernmental problem in the sense that no one jurisdiction—city, county, district, region, state, or federal—can solve it alone. In any place, it takes a network of organizations to coordinate their work and do so effectively. Federal funding and data collection requirements have also been part of the picture in each place.

This report draws examples from three jurisdictions that have shown gains in preventing and reducing homelessness. It also identifies local practices that contribute to progress. The Working Group researched varied governance models in the three case studies, concluding that the approach can profoundly influence effectiveness. Discussing these efforts to reduce homelessness will complement the expertise of other groups focused on this problem, including the USICH and national nonprofits such as Community Solutions and the National Alliance to End Homelessness. We recognized a need for expertise in public administration to be applied to

² Significant amendments to the McKinney-Vento Act were enacted in 2009 as the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act.

³ The USICH, <https://www.usich.gov/>, is a small, independently funded agency that coordinates the work of 19 federal agencies to prevent and reduce homelessness. Its staff works with communities to use federal resources effectively.

understanding and informing action to reduce homelessness and a need for more research addressing homelessness.⁴

We invite readers of this report to join us in exploring ways to strengthen intergovernmental efforts to reduce homelessness. Those who want to join us or share ideas are welcome to connect with us. In turn, we will keep you informed of our progress and plans.

Our Methods

We gained insights into the complexities of solving homelessness by talking to those who are immersed in the hard work of ending homelessness in each place and nationally. Our effort to develop an understanding of the challenges facing governments and others tackling this problem has proceeded opportunistically rather than systematically — first, by talking to experts and thoughtful practitioners who shared their insights from research and long experience; second, by reading through much of the relevant published analyses, focusing on identifying correlates of success; and third, by speaking in some depth with leaders primarily in three places identified by people with direct knowledge as ones having successfully grappled with the challenges of organizing and working within the U.S. intergovernmental system to reduce homelessness:

- **Houston, Texas**, where since 2010, a local nonprofit, working closely with the mayor and other leaders, has orchestrated the efforts of over 100 partners to deliver an integrated effort that reduced homelessness by more than 60 percent in a decade.
- **Santa Clara County, California**, where a strong partnership of local government and nonprofit agencies adopted a goal of housing 26,000 people between 2015 and 2025, and is achieving remarkable progress even as affordable housing options shrink in this wealthy, vibrant region and
- **In North Central Massachusetts**, where local leaders, including a community foundation and a state representative, and city housing officials joined the state's housing agency as an alliance committed to reducing homelessness and offering shelter while developing new supportive housing and other strategies to get people housed.

We also noted specific actions of other jurisdictions, such as Hennepin County, Minnesota's network building, that may offer models for others. We identified actions that contribute to progress from those investigations and conversations. We have applied this insight to construct some initial ideas on enhancing prospects for local success. The end of this paper raises several questions for further discussion and future discovery, partly to frame more systematic research on how to prevent and eliminate homelessness by improving intergovernmental aspects of the system.

⁴ Callahan, Richard F. 2019. "Homeless in America: Moving from the Margins in Public Management Research." *Journal of Public Management and Social Policy*. 26 (2): 4-19.

An Intergovernmental Perspective on Homelessness

Rather than presenting merely an abstract or academic problem, homelessness challenges the practical ability of our intergovernmental system to manage and eventually resolve a complex societal challenge that crosses jurisdictional boundaries. Although the incidence of homelessness correlates with shortages of housing affordable to low-income people, its components and dynamics vary over time and from place to place.⁵ Addressing homelessness will require strategies and arrangements that vary with local circumstances and, in each place, with the needs of each homeless individual or family. Lessons from emergency management can offer lessons in practices for coordination and dynamic, context-specific responses to address homelessness. An effective response, in every case, will require intergovernmental collaboration to identify and agree on the specific nature and sources of homelessness in a region or locality and then build systems with the capacity to support planning and action fitted to local conditions, find and sustain financing, use data to guide decisions and deliver timely integrated services appropriate to the needs of each individual or family facing homelessness.

Local Government Impact

The experience of homelessness occurs, and its effects are most deeply felt individually at the local level. Localities often are chiefly responsible for administering and helping pay for homelessness initiatives, programs, and services. They bear the fiscal burden imposed by high numbers of people living outside, in cars, or other makeshift or emergency shelters, and they share the cost of efforts to reduce those numbers. We believe the insights gained from studying places that have shown some success, paying attention to state and local perspectives and local conditions as we have done here through interviews and discussions with those operating at these levels, can help all participants in our intergovernmental system learn from others, mainly if supported by those that work with a national perspective, such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other federal agencies, and perhaps primarily if orchestrated by the cabinet-level U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Community Impact

Homelessness tests the problem-solving capacities of the public, nonprofit, and private sectors and the skills of individual leaders in those sectors. We acknowledge the seemingly intractable barriers that confront many communities trying to fashion a constructive response, including neighborhood resistance to developing or acquiring housing for formerly homeless people based in part on legitimate concerns about its local effects, lack of political agreement on the goal, the

⁵ Homelessness is one manifestation of a broader problem of access to affordable housing by households whose incomes are too low to pay market rents and do not have access to subsidized units. Although we do not address this larger structural issue here, we recognize what others have documented, the role that tight housing market conditions play in increasing rates of homelessness and complicating solutions (see Colburn and Aldern, 2022).

best strategy, and allocation of responsibilities among various actors, and difficulties in obtaining and sustaining resources for an integrated approach.

Current Federal Funding Structure

The work of delivering practical, sustained housing assistance with other services to reduce homelessness in each place is more complicated than it needs to be because of the way the intergovernmental system is organized. The structure of that system does not make it easy to tackle the boundary-crossing problem of homelessness. Federal grants-in-aid flow downward through multiple channels—some directly to cities or counties, some to independent local housing agencies, hospitals, school districts, or special purpose districts—a mosaic or palimpsest of overlaid jurisdictions. Some aid goes first to state governments, who then administer it through other channels: some through counties, some through municipalities, and some through other local or regional authorities. The largest federal grant to states, Medicaid, is delivered by private intermediaries and managed care organizations through various healthcare providers to individuals. The most extensive affordable housing production program is supported by federal tax credits administered by the U.S. Treasury Department and allocated to local projects by state agencies. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development administers other federal funds through grants to city and county governments, local and state housing authorities, and private owners of affordable multi-family properties (apartment buildings) to subsidize housing costs for low-income individuals and families.

Each federal program has a distinct set of application criteria, reporting requirements, auditing processes, eligibility and use rules, and often burdensome administrative requirements. This structure forces local and state agencies to focus on the vertical dimension of compliance and reporting upward to funders. Incentives and financial support for building an effective horizontal network of actors often require joint action with neighbors, which are much weaker.⁶

HUD's support for the [Continuum of Care \(CoC\) program](#) is an exception to this pattern. Nationally, over 400 CoCs are charged with promoting a coordinated local response by nonprofit and government providers of services to homelessness, including promoting their access to mainstream federal assistance programs and establishing a Homeless Information Management System (HIMS) to support integrated planning and delivery. However, CoCs may lack the capacity and authority over other actors to overcome jurisdictional and functional fragmentation and conflict, characterizing many local responses to homelessness. A recent study of CoCs noted challenges when there is a surge of first-time homeless persons seeking accessible, safe housing, coping with administrative burdens, and staff turnover.⁷ A CoC's jurisdiction may be a city, county, metropolitan area, non-metropolitan region within a State, or an entire State; in densely

⁶ See Pasachoff (2020). Also, Butler and Maguire (2022) offer ideas on how to build 'connective tissue' at a local level to overcome this structural problem.

⁷ Musso, Stanley, and Coutin (2023) discuss the administrative challenges facing CoCs and make recommendations to address these. Also see Willison (2021), Mosley (2021), and Musso, et al, (2023) for discussion of the limits of CoC coordination.

populated areas, a mobile population of those experiencing homelessness may cross multiple CoC service areas.

Intergovernmental Challenges

It is probably safe to say that even the most knowledgeable local actors cannot get their arms around the entirety of the resulting system—if a system is the right word—for dealing with homelessness. From the viewpoint of a homeless individual, accessing services is far more daunting, requiring agencies at all government levels to help people navigate the system and obtain an integrated set of services appropriate to their needs. They can only do this by working closely together. Given the challenges the intergovernmental structure presents, it is remarkable that many places have managed to construct coordinated responses. In the areas we have closely examined, local leaders and service providers came together and committed voluntarily to a common objective, formed an influential network, and used it to deliver coordinated outreach and services to those facing homelessness. Others, of course, have faltered at one stage or another.

The homelessness problem is dynamic, further complicating the local task of sustaining a coordinated response: homelessness in each place evolves and changes constantly. Federal and state assistance and attached conditions will likewise evolve, with surges related to crisis events like the pandemic and changes in strategic emphasis related to shifts in political leadership at different governmental levels. Experience and well-designed data collection can give participants new insights into the problem's sources and potential solutions. Given this dynamic, locally addressing homelessness requires learning and agility—applying multiple tailored strategies adapted over time to changing conditions. Every community battling homelessness struggles to balance urgency with practicality while maintaining a measured, thoughtful approach to addressing an evolving problem within a complex mosaic of mandates and jurisdictions.

Intergovernmental Strategy

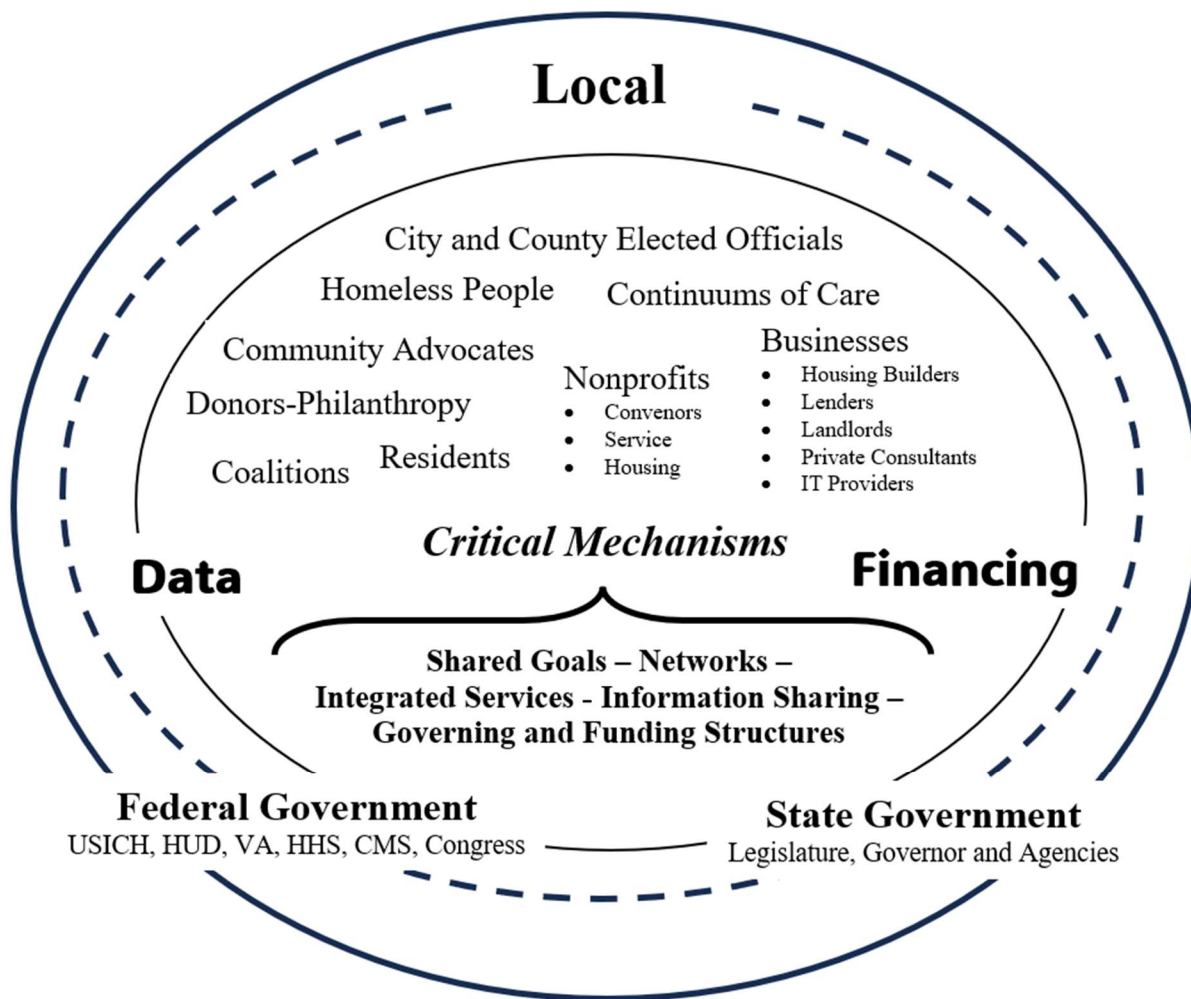
As illustrated by Figure 1 below, an effective response to homelessness addresses our intergovernmental system's horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontally, it requires an integrated approach by a coalition of local actors committed to shared goals and strategies, with the capacity to coordinate actions across often siloed and geographically divided programs and persons. Vertically, effective responses engage cities, counties, districts, and regions with state and federal governments, including elected officials, in coordination with managers and staff. Vertical coordination helps local actors overcome jurisdictional and other practical barriers to effective collective action in a complex intergovernmental system.

At all levels in the intergovernmental system, there is continuing, vigorous debate about the best strategies to reduce homelessness—only intensified by recent rises in numbers in many large metropolitan areas and reflective of a diversity of interests, ideologies, and interpretations of the evidence about what works best. It is a feature—and most would argue a strength—of our federal system that permits variation from place to place in the choice of policies. Our findings here indicate that effective responses to homelessness must be designed and implemented place by

place through the engagement of all government levels and partnerships across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Success depends on whether the strategy pursued in each place effectively responds to the specific context of local circumstances. We focus on identifying factors contributing to effective policy implementation and program development in a given place, regardless of the strategy or policies pursued.

Figure 1. A Framework for Homelessness Responses in the Intergovernmental Context



Source: National Academy of Public Administration Working Group on Homelessness

Five Basic Tasks

Based on what we have learned, we can identify approaches that have shown promise in cities such as Houston, Texas, counties such as Santa Clara, California, and non-metropolitan regions such as North Central Massachusetts. Each place, while differing in its choice of strategies, has grappled effectively with the following tasks:

- Defining, committing to, and communicating the challenge of homelessness and developing shared objectives and a coordinated strategy to address the problem.
- Building a network of organizations that plan and work together toward shared goals and develop ways to coordinate and synchronize their contributions.
- Designing and delivering timely integrated services appropriate to the needs of each person who is homeless or facing homelessness. Effective delivery requires aligning federal and state programs for addressing homelessness with local initiatives and capacity so that homeless individuals receive tailored services and support unique to their circumstances.
- Collecting, using, and sharing data to inform planning, prioritization, and tracking assistance to homeless persons. Intelligent application of person-centered data helps ensure integrated, timely delivery of services appropriate to each person's situation; evidence-driven decisions using person-centered, comprehensive, and real-time data help local actors make needed adjustments that address current problems or avert future ones.
- Building or strengthening governance and financing structures that support continued action and learning to sustain and improve local efforts over time.

Discussions with leaders in city, county, regional, and state jurisdictions around the United States reveal that they have had some success in battling homelessness. We call attention to these tasks not to prescribe best practices but as actions for localities to consider as they address their unique homeless populations and circumstances. Although presented here as a sequence, the tasks are best thought of as nested layers of continuous activity that interact in specific ways to be mutually reinforcing. For instance, as experience is gained with the delivery model, gaps will be identified that bring new actors into the network. As data-informed learning from experience deepens shared understanding, consensus around goals will intensify, and problem definition will become sharper. A formal organization initiated earlier to deal with a natural disaster or health emergency may become the basis for governance of homelessness efforts, and a financing vehicle such as a bond issue that becomes a rallying point for the network may define formal responsibilities for oversight of fund uses and a basis for sustainable financing. Ideally, successful actions will create reinforcing strengths among the layers of activity that expand the capabilities of the local effort, allowing it to undertake more ambitious goals as the number of homeless declines.

The following describes the ***five tasks*** listed above, illustrating how each is being addressed in places we have studied.

Task 1. Commit to and Communicate Shared Goals and Strategies

How people come together in a shared effort to address homelessness will differ from place to place. The first steps include seeking agreement on the nature of the problem, setting a longer-term goal and near-term targets, and embracing an initial strategy. Here are the origins of the efforts in the three places we looked at most closely.

Commitment and Communication

Houston⁸

In 2011, Houston, Texas, had the sixth largest homeless population in the U.S., almost 9,000 people. Service providers were operating in silos, with nearly no collaboration. In 2012, a broad array of city and county government and nonprofit partners came together, with leadership from Houston's Mayor and support from the business and philanthropic sectors. The local coalition defined their homeless problem as persons being "unhoused, living in spaces not meant for human habitation or in emergency shelter or transitional housing" and identified the number one cause of homelessness as lack of housing.

They agreed on common goals focused on moving people into housing. They also developed a new system and a streamlined, efficient process to achieve this, called "The Way Home." Under this banner, the group communicated with the public the view that people do not fall into poverty; they are pushed into poverty; they conducted and shared an analysis showing that the number one reason people become homeless is due to the loss of a job. The emerging coalition developed estimates showing the potential public sector savings from housing a homeless person. Analysis showed them it was brilliant to first focus on finding permanent housing for the most vulnerable homeless rather than providing day-to-day services on the street.

Housing assistance is provided by the local public housing authority, which has implemented a preference for housing people without homes; housing aid is combined with access to employment, income, and other needed services. With a common agenda and data-driven strategy, the Houston area partners have moved over 28,000 formerly homeless people into permanent housing, reducing the number of individuals experiencing homelessness by over 60 percent in a decade.

Santa Clara County⁹

Santa Clara County, California, is part of Silicon Valley's vibrant tech-based economy and tight housing market. Like many other California metro areas, it grapples with a high rate of homelessness. A local government-nonprofit coalition began piloting a variant of the "Housing First" approach in 2011. In 2015, all local governments adopted a "Community Plan to End

⁸ Nichols, Mike and others in Houston, Texas. 2023. Teleconference with the Academy working group. June 6.

⁹ Santa Clara County representatives. 2023. Teleconference with the Academy Intergovernmental Systems Panel, August 22.

Homelessness," prioritizing housing for extremely low-income people and engaging evidence-based approaches. President of the County Board of Supervisors Susan Ellenberg, a key partner in the local effort, describes people experiencing homelessness there as a "solvable crisis."

The group has conducted and communicated analysis showing that "at root, homelessness [in Santa Clara] is a housing problem, not an individual failing" and "a byproduct of the area's wealth." The county nonprofit partner, the CEO of Destination: Home, Jennifer Loving, said the consensus of their broad coalition of government and private partners is that the goal is to end homelessness, not just manage it.

The Santa Clara coalition has conducted a countywide education campaign to increase awareness of the causes and impacts of homelessness and its ongoing efforts to end homelessness.¹⁰ Projects to "bring along neighbors" include Housing Ready Communities that offer education, facts, and neighborhood organizing around the issue; listening to resident concerns, such as parking concerns; and meeting one-on-one with residents, specifically to discuss the connection between the region's wealth and its number of homeless.

Their strategy includes a mutually shared data system and an array of metrics, helping multiple actors work together to rehouse people. To address the limited supply of affordable housing, the coalition has used local bond funds to rehabilitate and construct over 5,000 units available to the homeless population. Their effort has placed more than 26,000 individuals in permanent housing since 2015. When they began, nearly three people would become homeless for every one person housed; by 2023, that ratio had fallen to 1.7. Last year, as Santa Clara helped 4,487 homeless people into housing, it saw a 24 percent increase in the number of people becoming homeless for the first time. The coalition continues to innovate, pursuing a prevention strategy—a guaranteed income pilot for homeless families—that is now the subject of a randomized controlled trial evaluation.

North Central Massachusetts¹¹

North Central Massachusetts comprises 33 towns and cities on the peripheries of Boston and Worcester. The Working Group, a coalition of leaders across the region, came together in 2021 under the auspices of the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts and the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance, which serves as the CoC for Worcester County. The pandemic served as a catalyst to action in 2023 when the pandemic multiplied the number of unhoused individuals in a region with no shelters accessible to most homeless persons, even as the number of homeless individuals was increasing. Individuals experiencing homelessness often dealt with multiple health issues that required treatment and supportive services. While there were many vital programs in the region, they needed to be coordinated. The Community Foundation

¹⁰ See page 12, Santa Clara County. 2020. Community Plan to End Homelessness 2020-2025. By the Community Plan Steering Committee. Accessible at: https://housingtoolkit.sccgov.org/sites/g/files/exjcpb501/files/CommunityPlan_2020.pdf

¹¹ Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance, Inc., and Central Mass. representatives. 2024. Teleconference with the Academy working group. January 23

convened several regional and sub-regional gatherings to assess the scope and scale of the challenge and identify solutions.

Through an iterative engagement process, the Working Group reached a consensus around a Housing First/Supportive Housing strategy. They identified and began to knit together the community infrastructure that could operate as a coordinated support system to provide stable, safe housing and other services. They chose a focus—individuals rather than families—and agreed to take a region-wide approach involving the cities of Leominster, Fitchburg, Gardner, Clinton, Athol, and Orange. A local Days Inn turned over its 100-room facility to the initiative, funded by State and Federal COVID relief dollars. The Community Foundation recruited a reliable and experienced service provider, South Middlesex Opportunity Council in Framingham, to convert the hotel into a low-threshold, non-congregated shelter. A trusted convenor representing a coalition of local, state, and federal officials, non-profit organizations, and experts engaging a broad public in learning and communicating enabled the region to define and commit to goals and a clear path forward.

Key Takeaways

These places and others we studied reached an effective collective effort by differing paths in varied contexts, but their stories share certain common elements. One is the catalyzing role of elected local leaders. In each place, a few talented leaders and administrators have been critical at the outset and in developing a joint capacity transcending jurisdictional boundaries and explicit mandates. The governing context in each local region and each state shapes leadership. This context includes applicable laws, policies, protocols, and guidance that may impact how they can realistically and effectively address the problem. Local leaders constantly work to forge closer connections with all stakeholders—ranging from government officials to businesses, nonprofit organizations, and the philanthropic community. They work to communicate about the problem, their goals, and their strategy with the public. Effective communication by leaders can also address localized concerns about the citing of housing for homeless persons in a particular neighborhood.

Another common element is the ability of the HUD-funded CoC organization to organize and provide core services and shared information about the homeless population and sources of support. Lacking formal authority over their local partners, CoCs rely on building shared commitment and specific working agreements central to their efforts. What these places have created is based on something other than formal authority; it cuts across and pulls together separately organized and siloed services. In each case, it is an informal alliance held together mainly by a shared commitment to reducing homelessness. It has become a joint plan of action and a practical strategy with assigned and orchestrated roles for the various players.

In each place we have examined, an important starting point for reducing the number of homeless people is community self-knowledge of local challenges and unmet needs. Developing a definition of homelessness shared by all those with a stake in addressing it and continually helping define public expectations about appropriate responses advances support for the effort and maintains focus. Defining what is meant by homelessness in the particular jurisdiction, expressing the urgency of the problem, and using valid and reliable data to specify the characteristics of and contributors to local homeless populations supports the development of a shared understanding

of the problem and later will help generate a plan of action tailored to a specific community's needs.

A locality's initial choice of strategy or strategies is a critical step. This report does not endorse a particular strategy or set of policies, as such choices must necessarily address and reflect local circumstances, current political realities and administrative arrangements, extant resources, and policy choices that consider those realities. A lack of consensus among local leaders on a common strategy greatly complicates the development of a coherent, effective response.

Local decisions are influenced and conditioned by strategy choices made at the federal and state levels, reflected in the authorized purposes for which they provide resources, and by courts' determinations of what is lawful. On the other hand, local leaders exercise discretion about what strategies to pursue. Choices that consider the analysis of the problem and its sources and evidence showing what works best under local conditions will lead to more cost-effective actions that, if sustained over time, can reduce homelessness. The strategy continues to evolve in each case, responding to changing leadership and better insight into ever-changing challenges.¹²

Task 2. Build Organizational Networks

The diversity of events and circumstances that contribute to a person becoming homeless—an eviction, losing a job, an illness, an addiction, a pandemic, a hurricane—implies they have a diversity of needs that must be addressed before they can move from the street into a home and remain there. Building a system that can deliver help requires building a network of responses spanning the functional and geographic jurisdictions of many actors and agencies that offer one or more services, such as housing assistance, employment assistance, and health and mental health care. Responses often cross political and sectoral boundaries—no one level of government, agency, or sector can solve homelessness alone. Our investigation into three localities found that each built a network to coordinate and align the complementary efforts of many local actors.

Our observations suggest that forming effective local networks may require: (1) initiative by a neutral, trusted party with resources, such as a community foundation, who can convene the players, prime the pump, and coordinate among them; (2) participation at the start by those with relevant expertise and authority; (3) cultivating trust among participants by sharing information, joint problem-solving, and demonstrating commitment, learning from the community and developing public trust; and (4) adopting specific tools that facilitate practical actions to help develop housing and services options, including project financing for low-income housing, streamlined permitting, and greater efforts to increase landlord acceptance of housing vouchers.

¹² Community Solutions has developed a theory of change model for its Built for Zero communities project that some places may find helpful; it can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hOdeRYDVKFLDC_Ikrjly8guya6BA-57m/view.

Network-Building

Houston

In Houston, Texas, the vision is that everyone *in our community has a safe place to call home*. It has guided the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County (CFTH), the lead agency since 2012 for the local homelessness response. Describing its role as an ‘air traffic controller,’ CFTH coordinates more than one hundred public, nonprofit, and private organizations in a syncopated rhythm toward becoming a place “where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.”

Philanthropy, a large source of support for these organizations, pushed for coordination and greater evidence of positive results. As part of building a coordinated approach, CFTH led a data-driven analysis of the problem, enabling the players to focus their efforts and streamline their approach. Concentrating on those who are unsheltered and most vulnerable, they developed a single, shared assessment tool and funded emergency shelters and transitional housing. They bolstered supportive services, ensuring ambitious standards of professional case management.

Intergovernmental communication and coordination developed at the local level, with Houston’s mayor appointing a liaison on homelessness, another key player who ensured strong communication channels and alignment. CFTH is the point agency with government agencies as agencies develop requests for federal funding. With federal COVID funds ending, all are concerned about how to replace these funds in the future. The discussion noted the challenge of reporting data to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the primary federal agency with which they work, and the centrality of healthcare to addressing homelessness through a relationship with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Coordination with the state and Harris County is required to administer housing vouchers. Comprehensive case management and employment support help homeless individuals sustain housing and income. The network of public, private, and nonprofit organizations tracks progress and enables service coordination in real time.

Santa Clara County

In Santa Clara County, California, coordination and collaboration are essential. “Thanks to our coordinated investments in temporary shelter, affordable housing, homelessness prevention, and basic needs services, we are starting to stem the tide of homelessness in our community,” reported Jennifer Loving, Chief Executive Officer of Destination: Home. The County first developed a network spearheaded by a cross-sector Steering Committee. Following evaluations of a local Housing First approach, the network was designed and established the 2015-2020 Community Plan to End Homelessness to address a high rate of homelessness resulting from concentrated wealth driving up rental costs and house values, causing a shortage of affordable housing. To address this, a 2016 bond issue financed the construction of 4,800 affordable supportive housing units. Cities and other governmental entities stepped up to support housing production efforts.

The coalition then worked on updating the Community Plan. The [*Santa Clara County Community Plan to End Homelessness 2020-2025*](#) engaged government agencies, community members and organizations, and most importantly, the unhoused. The plan sets an ambitious

goal to end homelessness and clear targets for generating new housing opportunities and employing strategies for support and prevention. The network agreed on targets and identified data needed for accountability, with distinct roles for city, county, state, and federal governments. Cities donated land. The County issued vouchers. The private sector is investing. Even the water district is involved. Since 2020, when the plan launched, 14,753 people have been housed. They experienced a 27% reduction in first-time homelessness and a 95% retention rate for those in supportive housing.

North Central Massachusetts

In North Central Massachusetts, State Representative Natalie Higgins (Leominster, MA) was determined to address housing insecurity well before the COVID crisis arrived. The state's Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) contracts with local organizations to provide temporary shelter for unhoused people. In North Central Massachusetts, only one shelter for individuals was under contract, and it was not a low-threshold one. As a result, many individuals experiencing homelessness were not served.

Having heard concerns from constituents that existing services were inadequate, Representative Higgins argued that one shelter was insufficient to serve the growing number of homeless people in Leominster and its surrounds. In 2019, when Steve Adams became the president of the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts (CFNCM), Representative Higgins informed Adams of the problem facing homeless individuals in the region.

Shortly after these discussions, the COVID epidemic hit, and the Community Foundation became a conduit for philanthropic and state COVID relief funds. The crisis put the Community Foundation in a position to fill a vacuum in homeless services coordination. Adams met with several key players, including Leah Bradley, CEO of the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance (CMHA), the Continuum of Care organization (CoC) for Worcester County. Together, CFNCM and the CMHA decided to convene a Working Group of leaders from Leominster, Fitchburg, Gardner, Clinton, Athol, Orange; homeless services organizations/housing authorities; Heywood & Health Alliance Hospitals; State legislative representatives and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

At first, they met informally. In 2021, they formalized their efforts as the North Central Massachusetts Housing First Working Group. The group identified gaps in shelter and supportive services and developed a coordinated strategy to expand options for temporary housing, linking the array of services across the region. They transformed a loose collection of programs and services into a region-wide integrated system. CFNCM became a central point, amassing and distributing public and philanthropic resources, developing data to manage and track, and greatly expanding the number of emergency low-threshold shelter beds in the region.

Key Takeaways

In each case, networks were initiated and facilitated by trusted convenors, pulling together those with the agency and authority to act across the system. The networks were developed by participants who understand their community's homeless populations and the circumstances, local conditions, and resource limits that help determine what is feasible. Participants include

appointed and elected officials and decision makers on matters as wide-ranging as land use, housing development, criminal justice, welfare, and health services. These networks also gather and use data. Data illuminating the complexity of the people and the system's challenges inform and enable these networks. They use and share data to improve processes, track results, and inform decision making.

In all three localities, the networks are focused and dynamic. In focus, each determined what problem they would solve, developed clear, actionable goals and joint strategies, and sought to learn from their efforts. They recognize what they can and cannot achieve and make tough choices about which piece of the problem they will tackle first. They balance the urgency to make immediate progress with the desire to achieve longer-lasting results. As networks formed out of necessity to address a pressing problem, they resemble emergency responders that come together after a disaster rather than long-standing public/private authorities designed to endure stable staffing and financing. The advantage of dynamic networks is that they are flexible, nimble, and creative. The disadvantage is that they must eventually confront questions regarding their joint efforts' future management and sustainable financing.

Task 3. Design and Execute Integrated Services Delivery

A comprehensive and tightly knit network can deliver integrated packages of housing assistance and other services appropriate to the needs of each homeless person or family. The national nonprofit Community Solutions has defined the goal as organizing [homeless response systems](#) that include dedicated providers such as CoCs but are broader—incorporating agencies from intersecting sectors, like health and mental health, in an integrated effort to both prevent and reduce homelessness. Here are examples we identified of places that have organized an effective delivery system, overcoming structural barriers to provide orchestrated service to the homeless population.

Effective Delivery Systems

Houston

The Greater Houston Area shifted focus in 2012 to coordinated efforts to help homeless people access housing labeled *The Way Home*. The Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, which is the Continuum of Care organization, orchestrates delivery. Obtaining housing is now treated as the first step on a person's path out of homelessness, supported as needed by employment/healthcare services and substance recovery support.

At various entry points, The Way Home's assessment tool is used for triage, assessing everyone's housing needs and vulnerability status, and directing people to needed help. Assessments can be performed by jails, hospitals, and the V.A., among others. Individuals are identified through referrals and by outreach teams. The assessment matches services to the person's needs and refers them to navigation services, housing, or a waitlist spot.

Houston's Homeless Management Information System supports participating organizations, which access data collected at the client and system levels. Case coordination and referrals can be monitored without unnecessarily exposing people's personal information. This public-private

services model has driven down costs and duplication, eliminated service gaps, and collected and used individual-level data to support implementation and guide enhancements.

Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County has approached homelessness by creating a public/private partnership, *Destination: Home*. It manages a "collective impact" delivery model with clearly defined roles for each level of government so that activities are coordinated rather than siloed. This model also allows the sharing of data and agreed-upon metrics to better assess progress and challenges, enabling governments, major corporations, developers, and nonprofits to set goals and reassess direction as needed. The priorities center around evidence-based solutions, targeting the most at-risk first and using the impact model to provide more housing and more acceptance of vouchers available through a countywide Supportive Housing System.

Hennepin County

Hennepin County Minnesota services model features expanded prevention services and engagement with the systems that serve low-income households—including the extensive Minneapolis Public Schools-based Stable Homes Stable Schools initiative, contributing to a 50% decrease in shelter use among families from 2014 to 2019. A further 50% decrease is attributable primarily to the widespread availability of the pandemic/COVID-response emergency rental assistance program and extensive protections against eviction supported by the state and federal government.

Integrated System Components in Action

School districts, Public Housing Authorities that administer federal low-income housing subsidies, and public and private health and human services organizations are key partners in a unified ecosystem of prevention services. Agencies whose primary role is in corrections, workforce development, public health, behavioral health, justice, or other services also work to identify housing instability and help people connect to mainstream resources or refer them as needed to more intensive support. Case managers provide the most at-risk households with one-on-one support to overcome significant barriers to housing stability or potential loss of housing, for example, by helping them access financial assistance. Simplifying and streamlining the delivery of emergency financial assistance also helps homeless people access rental assistance and financial assistance programs through a single streamlined application process.

Housing assistance necessarily plays a central role in any strategy to head off homelessness or reduce the number living on the streets or in emergency shelters. Our focus here is on implementing whatever strategy is chosen to provide an adequate pool of housing assistance. Still, it must be stressed that tight rental markets make this much more complex. Resolving to build or acquire a new supply of housing set aside for this population is likely to be slow, expensive, and

politically fraught; increasing priority for those most in need of and likely to benefit from vouchers or other assistance may be faster and less costly than alternatives.¹³

Local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) are critical actors; they administer public housing and portable housing vouchers that help people rent private apartments. Integrating PHAs' work with other service elements of integrated delivery to reduce homelessness illustrates the broader challenge of designing an integrated services strategy (See Appendix 1).

Key Takeaways

From our observations, there is not, and perhaps can never be, a standard model for delivering integrated services appropriate to each homeless person or family—one that specifies the roles of each agency or actor and ensures a seamless and cost-effective integration of their efforts to move people quickly from the streets to housing linked to appropriate supports. This should not be surprising given the diversity of jurisdictional structures across places, housing market conditions, climate and terrain, and the characteristics and needs of homeless people in their locale. Instead, each place must design a system that permits appropriate services to be delivered most effectively within the local structure of responsibility and funding.

Because there is no authority capable of assigning roles and directing the services required in each place and for each homeless person, government leaders and service agencies must broker agreements among independent providers that define the delivery model. The difficulty of providing integrated services through a distributed network without a designated authority responsible for orchestrating delivery makes this a potential point of failure. Conversely, we observe that the places where the local network has developed working agreements among government and non-government actors to collaborate in ways that support integrated services appropriate to the needs of everyone have had more success.

In a decentralized and fragmented system, getting the right services to a homeless person requires someone who specializes in helping individuals access the aid they need.¹⁴ Whoever plays this broker or navigator role must have the skills and tools to reach out to and understand the needs of homeless persons; they must form professional relationships to connect them, when ready, with sources of housing assistance and other services needed for them to move from the street. The role of the navigator/services broker/integrator needs to be clearly defined. It may be played by various local agency staff and funded from multiple sources. If not adequately filled, local delivery efforts may falter.

Many local service systems cannot provide people without homes sufficient access to housing assistance linked to supportive services. Administrative and other barriers reduce access by

¹³ For evidence on the power of offering housing subsidies to homeless families, see Gubits, et al., Family Options Study (2015), <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Family-Options-Study-Full-Report.pdf>

¹⁴ The intervention required depends on the circumstances of each homeless person. For example, Byrne and Culhane distinguish crisis homelessness – of brief duration and arising from a recent triggering event such as eviction or transition from an institution – from chronic homelessness and propose a critical time intervention technique for the former (2002).

homeless persons with disabilities to income support for which they are eligible, including Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). This income would help pay for housing and may provide eligibility for Medicaid-funded aid in securing housing and other support. The ability to close the access gap also depends on the priority local PHAs give to the homeless population for longer-term housing assistance.

Private owners/operators of rental housing outside PHA control are among the gatekeepers to affordable units. Access depends on whether sufficient help is given to homeless persons in navigating the housing market and overcoming a range of obstacles to renting, including lack of cash for deposits, exclusion based on criminal history or recent drug use, and landlord resistance. Especially in tight markets, housing vouchers and public housing administered by PHAs may need to be augmented by supplying supportive housing units reserved for this population or by cash payments, which have been piloted in some communities. If someone cannot access assisted housing when prepared to move off the street, the delivery effort will falter, making this a likely failure.

Finally, if local efforts do not address the flow of people into homelessness, even a robust attempt to place people into housing may be swamped. Successful delivery of preventive services to those most at risk depends first on understanding the social processes that may lead to the street—including youth aging out of foster care, those returning to their communities after incarceration, those fleeing abusive relationships, and newly arrived migrants without local contacts—and having a method to identify individuals within these larger flows who are most at-risk and effectively target them with appropriate interventions. Designing cost-effective preventive efforts is, for now, beyond the capabilities of many localities, given current knowledge about how to design proper intervention strategies.¹⁵ Therefore, this must be considered another likely point of failure in delivering effective services to reduce homelessness.

Task 4. Collect, Analyze, Share, and Use Information to Inform Decisions and Action

As the sections above make clear, those working to prevent, reduce, and eliminate homelessness need access to and analyze high-quality data to inform their actions to address homelessness challenges effectively and equitably. Such data analysis may also help those working to address homelessness spend available funding more quickly and cost-effectively. Data about housing—such as supply and cost trends of occupied, available, and planned housing—suggest where to focus and what to do. Data on housing trends can be even more informative when combined with additional analyses showing local housing trends in the context of local employment trends, disaggregated for different salary subsets.

Analyzed data capturing characteristics of unhoused people are certainly important, such as data about the numbers of homeless families, homeless veterans, victims of abusive relationships, and those with a disability—including substance dependence and specific mental health problems.

¹⁵ See Shinn, Marybeth and Jill Khadduri. 2020. *In the Midst of Plenty: Homelessness and What to do About It*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Such detailed data suggests the kinds of housing and other services likely to be most beneficial. Data visualizations showing the number and percentage of homeless who are long-time community residents and their ages may also affect local attitudes about unhoused people and bolster efforts to raise funds to address homelessness.

Some jurisdictions have built the capacity to link and analyze individual-level data. This gives them insight into the dynamics of homelessness, helping them better target and coordinate service delivery. It also gives them a more powerful tool to measure outcomes and evaluate impacts than can be had with only aggregated and not legally protected data. Below are examples.

Dynamic Data Usage

Houston

In Houston, Texas, over 100 entities make up the Coalition that works to address homelessness. The city provides training to ensure that everyone touched by the response system is followed in HMIS. Houston turns to epidemiologists to check data and accesses numerous foundations and think tanks for additional data, continually pushing for data on outcomes rather than input, activity, and output measures.¹⁶

Santa Clara County

In 2020, Santa Clara County, California, used data to prepare and share with the community a data-rich [Community Plan to End Homelessness 2020-2025](#), articulating specific targets and three strategies. At the end of 2023, it prepared and shared an [end-of-year progress report](#) describing the number of people housed in stable and temporary housing and those receiving services, with some sense of how that varied by sub-population.

The County's plan to end homelessness calls for process improvements related to data use, including better sharing of data across safety net, criminal justice, and housing systems to target homeless households or at-risk households and individuals; better use of data that is collected to understand what is working, what needs improvement and identify inequities; demographic data in all reports on homelessness to highlight and address inequities; and accessible dashboards that show program metrics and help hold actors accountable.¹⁷

North Central Massachusetts

In North Central Massachusetts, the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance (CMHA) convenes the coordinating group established during the pandemic of local and sometimes federal and state executive and legislative branch officials and local nonprofits in the region to discuss recent data analyses to decide where to focus and what to do next. The local community foundation has convened key players, working closely with the Continuum of Care and the CMHA. CMHA

¹⁶ Nichols, Mike and others in Houston, Texas. 2023. Teleconference with the Academy working group. June 6.

¹⁷ See page 15, Santa Clara County. 2020. Community Plan to End Homelessness 2020-2025. By the Community Plan Steering Committee. Accessible at: https://housingtoolkit.sccgov.org/sites/g/files/exjcpb501/files/CommunityPlan_2020.pdf

provides regularly updated data analyses to meeting participants. CMHA shares data analyses aggregated for the whole area but also meets with individual localities to share data analyses about their communities.

When doing that, CMHA starts by asking each local community if the data looks right -- a process of seeking buy-in and affirmation from community partners. Suppose community members challenge the numbers, as often occurs for annual or biennial point-in-time counts. In that case, CMHA works with each community to update the data where needed to help the community decide where to focus and what to do. The dashboard gives context on homelessness and its causes. Its presentation highlights local change contributing to rising homelessness, including a dramatic decline in rental vacancy rates over the last 13 years, rising rents, trends in eviction cases the past year, and annual trends for prior years for Worcester and other Massachusetts counties.

Contextual data can aid prediction and preparedness. For example, the patterns of nightly shelter attendance related to daily temperatures can help the community anticipate and plan for weather-related surges in demand and inform decisions about staff scheduling, space, and food needs.

King County

In King County, Washington, County officials work closely with the City of Seattle through the [King County Regional Homelessness Authority](#) and regularly look at analyzed data. They also occasionally tap assistance and statistical expertise from outside researchers to cull lessons from current practices to inform future action.

Mesa

Mesa, Arizona, regularly updates an online homelessness dashboard that helps community members inside and outside the government understand the number of homeless, trends, and characteristics of unhoused people, including the percentage of people with physical or mental disabilities, veterans, and those dealing with spousal abuse.

It succinctly conveys the primary reasons people in Mesa are homeless, with charts showing percentages. The [Mesa dashboard](#) enables drill-downs to get more details. It also shares data about time-limited projects, such as one on police outreach and one on park ranger outreach projects. Online data from Maricopa County, where Mesa is located, show [quarterly trends](#) for the most recent year and annual trends for two years.

Key Takeaways

The gap between places that have used data effectively to guide their efforts and those that have not arises partly from differences in resources and technical capability. Increased technical support for those places to help them apply modern data standards for individual and real-time data, more user-friendly technology, and deeper investments in the human capacity to manage data would serve the interest of more significant equity across places and increase their ability to use local data to learn and to target outreach and services.

Other obstacles to building and using integrated data on homeless individuals are legal and structural. Agencies contributing their data to a common platform must ensure their interests are not compromised. Where data are anonymized to understand better the dynamics of

homelessness and the efficacy of alternative interventions, agencies that share data may want to influence research priorities and disseminate findings.

Using data to track individuals as they have contact with multiple agencies and to support integrated service delivery raises another layer of issues regarding data security and personal privacy. These issues can be overcome by offering localities models for data sharing and use that have been shown to address these issues.¹⁸

Task 5. Build Sustainable Governing and Funding Structures

In the places we examined most closely, initial successes were driven by talented, committed leaders who can bring together local and regional actors across jurisdictional divides to forge informal, effective working relationships around a common objective.¹⁹ A crisis that catalyzes alignment among state, county, and city public leaders often determines the response. However, initial efforts may reach a critical juncture when informal relationships must be formalized. Reducing homelessness requires building initial momentum, coupled with or followed by the construction of governing arrangements and funding sufficient to sustain them over an extended period. Eventually, a formal governance structure that institutionalizes informal arrangements must emerge, allowing efforts to survive changes in leadership, funding, operations emphasis, and policy priorities.

In addition to formalizing their working relationships, localities seek to find reliable funding to sustain their long-term strategies and operations. This need for sustainable funds calls for an intergovernmental approach. In discussions with representatives of each jurisdiction interviewed, initial efforts to sustain funding for the future have taken different forms.

Just as developing plans and strategies and then implementing them must engage the whole community, jurisdictions can share the responsibility for funding. As major funders of local services, states and the federal government have important roles to play in ensuring the financial sustainability of local efforts.

Varied financing mechanisms can be developed for sustainability. Themes for financing structures emerged from our observations that federal and state governments could explore: (1) local dollars alone are rarely sufficient to solve a complex homelessness problem, and thus successful efforts blend financing streams from federal, state, regional, and local authorities, as well as private or philanthropic funds; (2) siloed and sometimes conflicting requirements for such funding streams can render spending ineffective without shared quantifiable goals and clear accountability structures; and (3) developing agreement on the appropriate cost shares in a crisis environment through intergovernmental cooperation, alignment of goals, and multi-year planning is difficult but essential.

¹⁸ A catalog of local data-sharing agreements among various stakeholders for public use has been compiled by the Urban Institute and the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership; it can be found here: <https://login.builtforzero.org/resources/catalog-of-data-sharing-agreements/>

¹⁹ For other examples, see Kettl, 2023

Financing Options and Obstacles

Blend Private and Public Funds

Houston, Texas, leverages federal dollars from HUD and other agencies to support its homelessness initiatives. However, some of this money is from temporary programs, and the Coalition currently has limited city funding for homelessness efforts. At the same time, significant buy-in has been sought from philanthropy and business to support the Coalition (The Way Home) system and its work; the Coalition is committed to strategically coordinating all dollars for the "highest and best use of funding and service providers."²⁰

Repurpose Underutilized Property

In June of 2021, Colorado Governor Jared Polis signed [SB21-242](#) into law, approving the issuance of grants and loans to local governments and nonprofit organizations for the rental, acquisition, or renovation of underutilized hotels, motels, and other properties to provide non-congregate sheltering or affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness. Operation Turn Key Acquisition, a short-term, low-interest loan plan, was funded with [\\$15 million from the State's Department of Local Affairs Division of Housing](#) and additional appropriations from ARPA. Colorado issued 17 awards totaling \$47 million,. This is one model for a cost share.

Local Voter-Approved Bond Measures

In May 2022, San Antonio voters [approved a measure to increase the City's Affordable Housing Bond Program by over \\$1.2 billion](#). These funds will enable the city to use \$150 million to create and improve affordable housing, including permanent supportive housing.

Santa Clara County, California, in reviewing results from its 2015-2019 plan to end homelessness in its 2020-2025 plan, recognized the successful 2016 bond issue "Measure A," an Affordable Housing Bond of \$950 million plus \$100 million in private contributions to support the implementation of the community plan.²¹ The most recent plan also articulates the need to engage the private sector to contribute funding to support health, safety, and shelter services.²²

Innovative financing strategies for new housing

In Santa Clara County, the non-profit Destination Home announced in July 2024 a [new cross-sectoral fund](#) in partnership with the San Francisco Accelerator Fund, Sobrato Philanthropies, and Apple, providing an initial \$50 million to serve approximately 400 households.

The California legislature has recognized the limits of current institutional design by rethinking the design of local governing arrangements and funding to address homelessness. With continued

²⁰ Nichols, Mike and others in Houston, Texas. 2023. Teleconference with the Academy working group. June 6.

²¹ See page 2, Santa Clara County. 2020. Community Plan to End Homelessness 2020-2025. By the Community Plan Steering Committee. Accessible at: https://housingtoolkit.sccgov.org/sites/g/files/exjcpb501/files/CommunityPlan_2020.pdf

²² Ibid.

growth in the numbers of individuals and families experiencing homelessness, particularly in the large metropolitan region of Los Angeles and in the concentrated area of the City and County of San Francisco, legislation coupled new funding mechanisms with the authority to work across current political jurisdictions.

The recent legislation permits new financing authorities with multiple political jurisdictions to fund homelessness responses and the statutory authority to create durable governing structures. These authorities can provide stability when dealing with term limits for elected officials and turnover of staff or nonprofits (see Appendix 2). This authority supports an outcome-focused network, a strategy for spending, and a forum for complex discussions about funding adequacy or trade-offs.

Key Takeaways

The governing formula to sustain a local effort to reduce homelessness over a long horizon will likely vary from place to place. In smaller places with fewer and lower jurisdictional boundaries, this could take the form of a metropolitan or region-wide written compact spelling out service-level agreements among the main actors and identifying who is accountable for delivering specific results. In a larger and more complicated metro area, the solution may be the creation of a new authority that is assigned responsibility for coordinating the actions of multiple jurisdictions and agencies and is accountable to elected leaders at local and state levels for achieving specified outcomes; this may be the case, as some have suggested, in parts of California.²³

As suggested by the local examples above, our research uncovered more challenges to establishing stable financing than solutions. As with governing arrangements, there is likely to be a different solution to the problem of sustained funding in varied locations; the solution depends in part on investments made by each level of government. Success also depends on how much flexibility those funders give local agencies to execute their chosen strategy, conditioned on their progress in reducing homelessness.

Both governing and funding arrangements to sustain efforts to reduce homelessness are fundamental problems that deserve greater attention from researchers. They also deserve practical experimentation with alternative models, ideally overseen, systematically supported, and evaluated at each level of government.

²³ Committee for Greater LA and Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs. 2019. We're Not Giving Up: A Plan for Homelessness Governance in Los Angeles, May.

Considerations for Moving Forward

Our case study method does not support definitive advice. However, the research does identify some leading questions about how governments and others can collaborate to support more effective responses to homelessness in places across the country. One point on which we agree is that no level of government or single organization can solve homelessness alone. Quoting from a comprehensive plan to address homelessness prepared by the California State Association of Counties²⁴, "No one level of government is solely responsible for the homelessness crisis. We need to develop a comprehensive and coordinated plan that includes all levels of government."

Our work suggests specific ways to improve intergovernmental collaboration—in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions—to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness. Based on what we have learned so far, we identify for all levels in the intergovernmental system and their partners the following questions as a basis for discussion and further exploration:

Federal Government

What can the Federal government do to support better state and local efforts to reduce homelessness?

1. Could the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) direct a national multi-agency and intergovernmental initiative to reduce homelessness, much as HUD and the V.A. did to cut veterans' homelessness by 50 percent?²⁵ This would require a more robust and centrally directed effort to deliver integrated services to people without homes by facilitating the coordinated and blended use of federal program funds to support locally-led strategies.²⁶ Federal staff could be detailed to the team long-term, possibly embedding in localities as is now done in selected places in USICH's ALL Inside Initiative. State and local government employees and others could be invited to participate under the terms of the Intergovernmental Personnel Act.
2. Could HHS/SSA/CMS and other federal agencies jointly administer a Cross-agency Priority Goal²⁷ to substantially increase the proportion of homeless persons with disabilities obtaining SSI or SSDI income assistance and receiving short- and longer-term housing assistance,

²⁴ California State Association of Counties. 2023. At Home: A Comprehensive Plan to Address Homelessness. March 16. <https://www.counties.org/home-plan> (accessed February, 2024)

²⁵ Brooks, David. "Opinion | What Government Does - The New York Times," 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/opinion/29brooks.html>.

²⁶ In addition to the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, organizational models that have achieved success and could be emulated to boost federal support for local efforts include Trusted Workforce 2.0 to reform federal personnel vetting, <https://www.performance.gov/trusted-workforce/> and the Permitting Council initiative to streamline federal environmental permitting for critical infrastructure, <https://www.permits.performance.gov/fpisc-content/permitting-council-o>

²⁷ Background on the use of Cross-agency Priority Goals in recent administrations can be found here: <https://www.performance.gov/about/performance-framework/#cap>

possibly by supporting States' creative use of Medicaid waivers and incentivizing greater use of HUD's housing programs that help disabled people pay the rent?

3. What more could HUD do to support local and state PHAs in prioritizing assistance, based on evidence, to those most in need and likely to benefit, including the unhoused? Would it help if HUD streamlined administrative requirements and optimized its property inspection program to reduce occupancy delays and increase landlord participation?²⁸
4. In what other ways could HUD improve how it helps federal assistance recipients find, develop, and use evidence-driven collaborative solutions to address homelessness? What about pooling federal funds from multiple programs to accelerate reducing homelessness? Building on changes to the Uniform Guidance on Grants, what actions could the federal government take to support and facilitate locally developed solutions to homelessness that cross geographic, functional, and federal program boundaries? What changes in the regulations and law would facilitate such arrangements?²⁹
5. What standard measures would help the federal, state, and local governments make more informed decisions to address homelessness? How practical are point-in-time and other currently used measures—compared to person-specific, real-time measures—for various users and purposes? What analyses could and should the federal government conduct with the data it collects from CoCs and other grantees, and for what purposes? How often should this information be shared, and with whom? How can the federal government assess the value contributed by data collection, analysis, and information-sharing on homelessness?
6. Can the federal government, including the White House, USICH, and other federal agencies, help local communities fashion more effective strategies to prevent the escalation of homelessness, undergirded by research, data collection, analysis, and prediction? Could the research issues be explored as part of agency Learning Agendas required by the Foundations of Evidence-based Policy Act?
7. What additional steps could the federal government take to better communicate to the public and policy makers at all levels of government about the causes of homelessness and factors that exacerbate it, using data, analyses, and research?
8. How can the federal government incentivize communities to develop consensus measures for regional goals that align resources and efforts? Can federal agencies strengthen their technical

²⁸ The case for inspection reform and ideas for how to do this are outlined in Stegman and Shea (2024). HUD's new NSPIRE system for housing inspection prioritizes health and safety over appearance, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/reac/nspire A HUD evaluation focused on landlord incentives now underway may also inform options here.

²⁹ The revised Uniform Guidance on Grants includes both new and preexisting provisions that can be important levers for improving cross-agency approaches to reduce homelessness. There is now explicit language saying grant funds can be used for data, evaluation, and integrated data systems. Similar language for community engagement is supportive of using community feedback to break down delivery silos. The "Exceptions Authority" in section 200.102, which has not been used to date, gives permission to federal agencies to grant waivers and streamline compliance reporting for grantees who develop boundary-crossing approaches and commit to meaningful reporting and accountability for results.

assistance efforts to help local and state governments overcome jurisdictional and other barriers to fashioning coordinated regional responses?

9. How can the federal government and states incentivize the creation of a vehicle or mechanism for civic engagement and support the alignment of private and philanthropic efforts, provide advice and direction, and ensure accountability for reductions in the number of people experiencing homelessness?

State Governments

1. What can State governments do to support local and regional efforts to reduce homelessness? Should more states form state-level interagency councils to support local and regional strategy development and help coordinate the implementation of state support for local and regional networks addressing homelessness?
2. Could states consolidate grant reporting countywide or within a multi-county region to support a countywide or regional plan? Such plans would need to be built and approved by counties and cities that are ultimately responsible and accountable to constituents for implementing the plan and have unique authority to site the required infrastructure.³⁰
3. What role can states play in identifying and creating authorities to site new affordable housing and required infrastructure and updating existing codes that allow existing homes and sites to be upgraded more quickly and affordably? Could States update building codes and land use regulations to allow for the siting of ‘tiny home villages’ using affordable, non-traditional housing technologies and construction options? What more can States do to promote affordable, non-traditional housing technologies and construction options without requiring code updates?
4. Could states play a more substantial role in integrating data from multiple systems, including data on homelessness and other relevant data from national, state, regional, local levels, and private sector systems? Can states increase the number of users of such systems and work to advance understanding and capacity to use data by all?
5. What lessons can be learned from states that have already received Medicaid 1115 waivers (e.g., what data collection requirements did they impose, and how have they successfully coordinated with local homeless service providers)? Does experience show that using these funds is cost-effective in addressing social determinants of health, including critical time interventions to aid people experiencing homelessness?
6. Could states consider creating training and certification for workers in the housing field and homelessness navigator field? Adding to the professionals working on housing and homelessness would help highlight the specialized knowledge required to be effective

³⁰ Adapted from, California State Association of Counties. 2023. At Home: A Comprehensive Plan to Address Homelessness. March 16. <https://www.counties.org/home-plan>

practitioners in assisting individuals with housing issues. This could be achieved through a state, community college, local government, and health plan partnership.³¹

Local Governments

1. What can localities do to leverage the intergovernmental system to reduce homelessness? What would help local elected officials, including mayors, county executives, and their nonprofit partners, initiate, catalyze, and energize local networks that reduce homelessness? Based on our observations, elected leaders are always central to initiating such efforts, inspiring others to coordinate, and promulgating ambitious goals that others can rally around. In addition to mobilizing resources under their direct control, they typically can use their positions to help cross-jurisdictional barriers and facilitate discussions to address other sources of resistance to coordinated action.
2. How can more localities build on the CoC mandate for an HMIS to acquire and use a comprehensive data system to support joint planning and operations and build greater capacity to use and analyze to guide their efforts? Community Solutions has shown that collecting and providing access to comprehensive, real-time, person-specific data is necessary to accelerate housing placements and can drive reductions in homelessness. Data-sharing between homeless response systems and intersecting sectors, like health care, is also vital to preventing homelessness.
3. From a local perspective, what steps can federal and state agencies take to make the intergovernmental system more effective in supporting local efforts that span functional and jurisdictional boundaries?
4. How can local governments develop regional governance by making decisions around shared objectives to reduce homelessness? How can local governments align other investments with regional goals for reducing homelessness?

Conclusion

What more can federal, state, and local governments and nonprofit organizations do together, leveraging existing administrative flexibilities, to learn from each other's experiences and overcome barriers to practical intergovernmental approaches to reducing homelessness?

By raising these questions, we are joining the ongoing national effort to strengthen the intergovernmental system's capabilities to address homelessness. We all look forward to seeing the experience of homelessness—for each place and each person, year after year—become increasingly rare and fleeting. As our contribution, we hope to partner with others to strengthen efforts at all government levels and, with our partners, facilitate a deeper dialogue on the intergovernmental dimensions of this continuing challenge.

³¹ Ibid

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Appendix 1

Low-Income Housing Assistance and Homelessness

Establishing a pool of housing assistance sufficient to house both the current people experiencing homelessness and those in the future is a critical element of any local strategy. The means of doing this will vary with local housing market conditions. In places with a severe shortage of affordable housing, it may be necessary to develop new supportive housing dedicated to the homeless population, but in this and other places, the more cost-effective choice may be housing vouchers that give people access to the private housing stock.

Funding for housing assistance comes mainly through annually appropriated programs administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Because these programs are funded through annual appropriations, the pool of federal assistance is limited. In most years, funds are sufficient to renew each place's existing pool of subsidies. The assistance pool is incremented in some years—usually by adding new vouchers. In 2024, for instance, with funding authorized in response to the COVID pandemic, HUD, through [Emergency Housing Vouchers](#) (EHV), awarded 70,000 housing choice vouchers to local PHAs to assist individuals and families who were homeless, at-risk of homelessness, fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking, or were recently homeless or had a high risk of housing instability. Additional funding for homelessness assistance and supportive services was provided through HUD's HOME program as part of the [American Rescue Plan](#) in 2021.

Because they administer both vouchers and public housing, local PHAs are critical in building a network of local actors working to reduce homelessness. Voucher subsidies pay part of the rent up to the local payment standard tied to the distribution of area private rents, with tenants contributing 30 percent of their cash income. In public housing, the tenant contribution is set similarly, with federal grants to the PHAs covering operating costs and capital needs. PHAs set priorities and conditions for whom they will offer to assist. Because the pool of subsidies in most places is far smaller than the numbers applying for aid, they may prioritize assistance on a first-come-first-served basis, using a lottery system or based on local determination of needs. Waiting lists are long and sometimes closed for long periods. Governmentally, PHAs are headed by boards appointed by local elected officials (and at the state level for non-metropolitan areas); their accountability is primarily to HUD, which oversees their compliance with national operating standards.

PHAs lack administrative control over other sources of affordable housing in the locality, including privately owned apartments developed with attached federal (Section 8) subsidies or with federal Low-income Housing Tax Credits. Owners of LIHTC-financed properties must keep rents affordable to lower-income households but not to most homeless persons.

In June 2023, HUD issued new guidance to PHAs on strategies to expand housing opportunities for individuals and families experiencing homelessness through the Public Housing and housing voucher programs. The notice revised the definition of homelessness to report in the Inventory Management System/Public Housing Information Center (IMS/PIC) or its successor system

offered new guidance on how PHAs and CoCs can share data derived from IMS/PIC or its successor system and the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), and updated guidance on waiting list management and preferences; screening policies regarding criminal activity and substance use; rental history; program termination and eviction policies; and information regarding [pairing project-based vouchers](#) with CoC Supportive Services to create Permanent Supportive Housing. This was done to encourage PHAs to become familiar with their local CoC projects and coordinate entry systems to strengthen collaborations to make each organization's efforts more effective.

A proposed rule published in the fall of 2023 would amend HUD's existing regulations for public housing and certain project-based rental assistance that govern admission, eviction, and termination decisions for applicants with criminal records or a history of involvement in the criminal justice system. This rule would require PHAs and providers of project-based rental assistance to revise practices that may deny aid to individuals with criminal histories but who do not pose a risk to other residents' health and safety. Housing helps to reintegrate people released from incarceration back into society; therefore, HUD is exploring ways to ensure that housing opportunities are not denied to people with criminal histories not relevant to their suitability as tenants. The proposed [rule](#) reduces the risk of Public Housing Agencies and owners of federally assisted housing violating nondiscrimination laws.

These steps help expand federal support for local efforts and bring PHAs into their community's network of service providers. However, HUD and others could do more to engage PHAs actively in this network and prioritize access to subsidies for those in greatest need of and most likely to benefit from assistance.

Appendix 2

Community Revitalization and Investment Authorities

In recent years, the California State legislature has passed laws that enable counties, cities, and special districts to form new governmental entities for each of the unique homelessness areas in the state. These statutes created three types of public authorities. One, the Community Revitalization and Investment Authorities Act of 2016 (CRIA), focused on investments needed to deal with economically depressed areas. Two, the Enhanced Infrastructure Financing Districts Act (EIFD) focused on all forms of infrastructure and public investments needed to support sustainability. Three, the Climate Resilience Districts Act of 2023 (CRD) adds to these capacities any additional investments and operating authority to deal with climate adaptation. These statutes permit new separate governmental entities to cross the boundaries of the existing array of complex general and special-purpose governments.

These new public districts have the authority to organize themselves and create business plans that address the problems they confront. For homelessness, this includes affordable housing, health services, and economic opportunities with funding for construction and ongoing maintenance. To form a financing district, the board, called a Public Finance Authority (PFA), must prepare a business plan that identifies the source of funds needed to deal with the homelessness problem in the area, including capital, services, and maintenance—current and future. These PFAs have the legal authority to issue public bonds that can be amortized by collections of beneficial uses from their investments, such as tax increments from the increased value of housing units, places of business, service facilities, and blight mitigation. They have all the financing authorities codified in California’s law, where there is a nexus between revenues and expenditures. They can be recipients of grants, licenses, fees, tax credits and property from all levels of government and bundle these with resources with revenues they develop. They also have the authority to raise tax revenues requiring voter approval.

To initiate the process of creating these financing and business entities, general-purpose governments, counties, and cities, determine the geographic area of the problem. Depending on the situation, the district’s size can vary from a part of a city, county, or multiple counties. If there are numerous homelessness areas, an entity can be separated into non-contiguous districts. The next step is to create a board that includes representatives for each governmental entity that can bring financial and expenditure powers to help address the problem. Additionally, all new boards require a public member from the impacted homeless community.

The PFAs are not operating governmental agencies but decision makers for the integrated business plans they raise money for and more importantly, accountability vehicles for its implementation. They have the authority to enter streamlined agreements: public/public, public/non-profit, and public/for-profit to implement their business plan. Utilizing the complex web of existing entities in an integrated and effective partnership that reports to the board, the PFAs are charged legislatively to be accountable to the constituents in the district for their outcomes and goals and to those who provide financial resources—intergovernmental and market

finance resources. They have financial and performance accountability created by the nexus of their financial structure linking resources to results.

PFAs remain in place for the duration of the time horizon of the revenue streams in their business plan, e.g., the time horizon of issued bonds, tax revenues enacted, or intergovernmental resources obtained. They can extend beyond political cycles and terms in the office of policy leaders or administrators, possibly addressing a problem that has persisted with prior networks and cooperative agreements. Once their mission is completed, they cease to exist.

A unique feature of these statutes is that they grant permission to the political leaders of existing governmental units to design new authorities, “new rules of the game,” to solve problems particular to their geography and their conditions rather than spelling out what and how they should do that. Several proof-of-concept pilots are developing in Los Angeles County and San Bernardino County to test this governance approach.