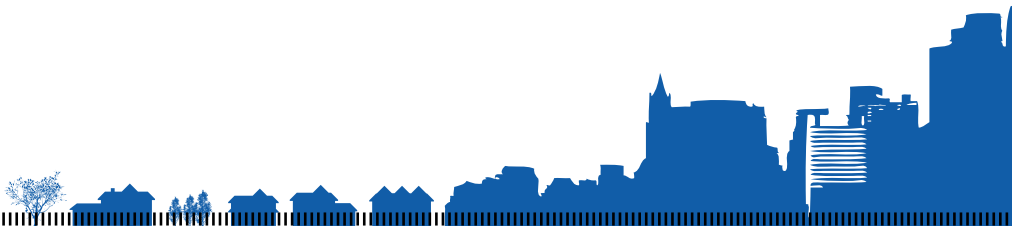# Advancing HUD's Learning Agenda through Cooperative Agreements with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Alaska Native/ Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions

Short White Paper on Homelessness

Advancing HUD's Learning Agenda through Cooperative Agreements with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Alaska Native/ Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions: Short White Paper on Homelessness

Introduction

The Office of Policy Development & Research (PD&R) within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recently published a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) titled *Advancing HUD's Learning Agenda through Cooperative Agreements with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Alaska Native/ Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions.* Through this funding opportunity, PD&R seeks to fund quality research that contributes to knowledge on housing and community development and to support minority-serving institutions to conduct housing and community development research important to the communities and students the institutions serve. Applicants for funding must submit a research project proposal that addresses one of the specific research questions featured in the NOFO.[1] The research questions are broadly organized under seven topic areas: (1) Community Development and Place-Based Initiatives, (2) Disaster Recovery, (3) Fair Housing, (4) Homelessness, (5) Homeownership, Asset Building, and Economic Opportunity, (6) Housing and Health, and (7) American Indian, Alaska Native, and/or Native Hawaiian Housing Needs.

This short white paper is designed to provide a high-level overview of the current state of research within the topic area of Homelessness, references to foundational studies related to Homelessness, and the general context for the research questions that are included in this NOFO. This paper is designed to provide potential applicants with a common grounding in the topic as they consider this new funding opportunity.

Background

On a given night in 2023, approximately 653,100 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States. This is the highest number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night since the Point-in-Time (PIT) count's baseline year in 2007. Six in 10 people experiencing homelessness stayed in sheltered locations, such as emergency shelter, transitional housing, or safe haven programs. The remaining 4 in 10 experienced unsheltered homelessness, meaning they were living on the street, in an abandoned building, or in another place that is not suitable for human habitation. People who are Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander are overrepresented among the population experiencing homelessness. Urban areas report the largest overall percentage of people who

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[1] See a full list of the research questions in Section III.G under the subheading "Eligible Research Questions."

experience homelessness (59 percent), with the remaining 4 in 10 people living in largely suburban (23 percent) and rural areas (18 percent) (HUD, 2023).

Research suggests that the drivers of homelessness are partially structural. In their book "Homelessness is a Housing Problem," Gregg Colburn and Clayton Page Aldern analyzed data from 30 of the largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. and found that tight housing markets (i.e., high rents and low vacancy rates) are the strongest predictors of differences in homelessness rates across regions (Colburn and Aldern, 2022). The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that, in 2022, the U.S. had a shortage of 7.3 million rental homes that were affordable and available to extremely low-income renter households. Every state had a significant shortage of available and affordable homes, ranging from 14 affordable and available homes for every 100 extremely low-income renter households in Nevada to 57 in South Dakota (NLIHC, 2024). Most researchers agree that lowering housing costs will decrease homelessness (Colburn and Gregg, 2022; Jackson and Kawano, 2013; Moulton, 2013; Quigley and Raphael, 2004). Previous studies have also identified income inequality as a significant driver of community-wide variation in homelessness. (Byrne, Henwood, and Orlando, 2021).

Within any community, individual factors can also increase someone's risk of experiencing homelessness. Long-standing historical and structural racism contribute to certain groups being overrepresented among people who experience homelessness. For example, people who are Black or African American made up 13 percent of the total U.S. population and 21 percent of the population living in poverty. This same group, however, makes up 37 percent of all people experiencing homelessness (AHAR, 2023). These inequities are the byproduct of the lingering effects of racism, including slavery, segregation, redlining, and housing discrimination. Other individual experiences and characteristics can also increase risk including employment status, poverty, mental and behavioral health status, experiences of domestic violence, and the sudden onset of an illness or injury (Colburn and Gregg, 2022).

The consequences of enduring homelessness (both temporary and chronic) can be far-reaching and severe. Compared with the general population, people who experience homelessness report poorer physical and mental health outcomes, and they are more likely to have higher rates of hospital usage (Mitchell, Waring and Ahern, 2023; Colburn and Gregg, 2022). People experiencing homelessness also experience higher mortality rates, particularly if they are enduring unsheltered conditions or experiencing chronic homelessness (Funk et al., 2022; Richards and Kuhn 2022). In addition to health impacts, individuals who experience homelessness are more likely to experience incarceration or unemployment (Mitchell, Waring and Ahern, 2023).

HUD's Continuum of Care (CoC) and Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) Programs assist individuals and families experiencing homelessness and provide them with the services they need to move into transitional and permanent housing, with the goal of achieving long-term stability. The CoC Program funds permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing, transitional housing, and supportive services (e.g., street outreach, crisis counseling, etc.). CoC funds are competitively awarded, with eligible recipients being nonprofit organizations, state and local governments and their instrumentalities, public housing agencies, and Tribes and Tribally

Designated Housing Entities. Through this program, recipients may also receive funding for planning activities. HUD's ESG program provides additional resources for street outreach, emergency shelter, homelessness prevention, and rapid re-housing. The ESG program is formula based, and funding is awarded to state, local, and territorial governments. Awardees may distribute funds to subrecipients, including nonprofit organizations and local government agencies.

Research Questions of Interest Related to Homelessness

HUD is interested in research proposals that address one of the following policy-relevant research questions, which are adapted from [HUD's Learning Agenda](#).

1. How have communities' efforts to address homelessness among youth aged 16-25 evolved over the past decade? What efforts have been most successful, and what are the lessons learned?
2. What are promising local solutions to homelessness and overcrowding in rural communities?
3. What strategies have communities implemented to overcome the barriers faced by people experiencing homelessness when trying to access emergency shelter?
4. What is known about local community responses to unsheltered homelessness and best practices with respect to encampments, vehicle homelessness, and other forms of unsheltered homelessness?

Context for the Research Questions of Interest

Additional context for each of the four research questions of interest is provided below.

Question 1: How have communities' efforts to address homelessness among youth aged 16-25 evolved over the past decade? What efforts have been most successful, and what are the lessons learned?

It is difficult to accurately assess the prevalence of youth homelessness due to its broad and hidden nature. HUD's 2023 PIT data estimates that approximately 34,700 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 experienced homelessness on a single night in 2023, representing a 15 percent increase from 2022 (HUD, 2023). However, instead of accessing formal shelters, many young people use temporary sleeping arrangements like couch surfing or paying to stay in motels. These temporary situations do not meet HUD's definition of homelessness that it uses for the PIT count, and thus may be excluded from the official count. Using a broader definition of homelessness, the Department of Education identified 1.2 million students experiencing homelessness in the 2021-2022 school year. More than 75 percent of the students were identified as couch surfing or doubled up, some of them in unsafe environments (NCHE, 2023).

Youth enter homelessness for various reasons including family conflict, poverty, and housing insecurity. Mental health and substance use disorders may further exacerbate housing instability. Youth engaged with public systems, such as child welfare (including foster care and juvenile

justice), also experience homelessness at higher rates compared with peers who are not engaged in these systems (Morton et al., 2018b). Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or intersex (LGBTQI+) and youth of color also face a higher risk of experiencing homelessness (Morton et al., 2018a). Because of their age and limited resources, homeless youth are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. They may also lack the financial assets, legal capacity, and self-sufficiency skills to obtain stable housing without assistance.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) recommends a two-pronged approach to address youth homelessness: (1) improve youth homelessness data collection, and (2) increase the capacity and coordination of youth homelessness system response (USICH, 2020). HUD has funded several studies focusing on improving youth homelessness identification and estimation methods to better understand the characteristics and unique needs of this population (Morton et al., 2018; HUD, 2024c). In addition, HUD and other federal partners provide resources for communities to improve their local identification and outreach efforts as well as annual PIT counts specifically designed to target youth (HUD, 2020). HUD also supports local efforts to strengthen system coordination. For example, the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) selects communities through a competitive grantmaking process to receive financial and technical assistance to develop and implement a coordinated, regional approach to prevent and end youth homelessness (HUD, 2018b). A key component of YHDP is communities' collaboration with youth and young adults who have lived experience of homelessness. An early implementation evaluation found that YHDP sites increased coordination among community partners and expanded youth-specific services compared to non-YHDP sites (Henderson, 2020). Similarly, HUD recently announced the availability of Youth Homelessness System Improvement Grants for select communities to improve their existing youth homelessness response system or to develop a new one (HUD, 2024b).

Recognizing the vulnerabilities that youth involved in the child welfare system experience, HUD has implemented two programs to direct housing resources towards this population: the Family Unification Program (FUP) and the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative. Both programs leverage partnerships between Public Housing Agencies and Public Child Welfare Agencies to identify eligible youth and provide them with Housing Choice Vouchers and supportive services to improve their housing stability and well-being as they remain in or transition out of the child welfare system. HUD-supported research corroborates the heightened risk these youth face, as well as the need for programs designed to support them (Dion et al., 2014a; Dion et al., 2014b; Morton et al., 2018). Research indicates that these programs can be useful for preventing and addressing homelessness among these youth but barriers to utilization persist (Ault and Norwood, 2024; Dion et al., 2014a; Fowler et al., 2018).

Outside of child welfare-involved youth, little empirical evidence exists on successful youth housing models for the general population of young people experiencing homelessness. For example, recent systematic reviews of youth homelessness interventions, including several randomized evaluations, have determined that many studies were methodologically weak or poorly designed. Few evaluations included long-term followup, making it difficult to forecast the long-term impact of interventions. More rigorous evaluation is also needed to study the youth

homelessness system response continuum including prevention, outreach efforts, and efficacy of youth-service models. (Morton et al., 2020; Semborski et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, research has revealed some promising program features. For example, these same reviews found that youth-centered housing and built-in supportive services, such as intensive and interdisciplinary case management, improved wellbeing and housing stability. Similarly, embedding Housing First[2] principles within supportive housing settings, developing relationships with youth, and including youth in program development are associated with longer housing tenure. Practices focusing on upstream prevention, such as providing intensive case management for youth transitioning out of juvenile justice or foster care, may also mitigate homelessness occurrence (Morton et al., 2020; Semborski et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019).

The increased prevalence of programs and initiatives designed for youth experiencing homelessness presents new opportunities to study the efficacy of these interventions in preventing and addressing youth homelessness. Possible areas of inquiry might include research documenting successful interventions communities have employed and whether these interventions can be scaled, as well as research identifying successful program features.

Question 2: What are promising local solutions to homelessness and overcrowding in rural communities?

According to the 2023 PIT count, about 119,000 people experiencing homelessness live in rural areas, comprising 18 percent of the total population experiencing homelessness (HUD 2023). Despite this, researchers often describe rural homelessness as a hidden problem (Aron 2006; Cloke, Milborne, and Widdowfield 1999). This is because rural homelessness differs from the typical image of individuals sleeping on city streets or in homeless shelters. Instead, it more commonly involves families (especially single women with children) living in geographically remote, isolated areas that limit their visibility to the community. Many rural individuals facing housing insecurity also live in doubled-up or overcrowded conditions, which are not included in HUD's definition of homelessness used for the PIT count and are therefore excluded from official homelessness counts (National Coalition for the Homeless 2007; National Alliance to End Homelessness 2010; National Coalition for the Homeless 2020; Vissing 1996). This is especially problematic in tribal lands as housing insecurity among Native Americans primarily takes the form of doubling-up (Biess, 2017; Pindus, et al., 2017). The absence of a standard definition for rural areas further complicates efforts to measure rural homelessness accurately and provide relevant services (Yousey and Samudra 2018).

Addressing rural homelessness is challenging due to limited resources and large, geographically dispersed service areas. The service network in rural areas is also less developed than in urban areas, resulting in fewer shelters, supportive services, and other safety nets for at-risk individuals

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[2] Housing First is an approach to homelessness assistance that prioritizes offering housing without preconditions. This approach is guided by the belief that housing is a necessity, and people need to have their basic needs met before they can pursue other quality of life goals, such as employment, budgeting, or substance use issues.

and families (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2010). Where services do exist, lack of robust public transportation presents a significant barrier, making it especially difficult for very low- and low-income people to access the resources they require (Housing Assistance Council 2016; National Alliance to End Homelessness 2010). Additionally, the dearth of affordable rental housing, especially affordable, quality rental housing in rural communities, limits housing options for very low- and low-income people.

Recently, HUD has funded initiatives to expand existing programs and provide additional capacity to rural areas to address homelessness. Through the Special Notice of Funding Opportunity to Address Unsheltered and Rural Homelessness, HUD awarded $66 million dollars in Rural Awards. HUD also partners with USICH and other federal agencies to oversee *All Routes Home: Ending Homelessness in Rural America,* a cross-agency strategy to address rural homelessness. The strategy includes providing technical assistance to enhance capacity in rural areas, creating opportunities for collaboration, and applying a rural lens to current practices and programs (HUD 2018). HUD's Rural Homelessness page consolidates resources into a single location so they are more accessible. It includes links to best practices, tool kits, and strategies developed by agency partners.

Research on rural homelessness is limited, and only just beginning to reveal the extent and scope of the challenge and possible solutions. Applicants are encouraged to propose topics that build upon the existing research base. Topics may include evaluating local interventions in rural communities, examining variation in homelessness across different types of rural areas and among different populations, developing methods for better enumerating rural homelessness, or studying existing service networks in rural places, among other topics.

Question 3: What strategies have communities implemented to overcome the barriers faced by people experiencing homelessness when trying to access emergency shelter?

Emergency shelters can offer people experiencing a housing crisis a safe, warm, and temporary place to stay. Emergency shelter can include spaces like congregate or seasonal shelters, or vouchers for hotels/motels, so long as the assistance provided is immediate and short-term. Emergency shelter can be provided by both public and private organizations. Many emergency shelters also offer meals, bathing facilities, and case management and other services to help ensure that people's basic needs are met and to help them transition to permanent housing. Emergency shelters play a critical role in a community's homelessness response system (NAEH, 2022).

However, shelter funders and operators sometimes establish rules and eligibility criteria that create barriers to entry. Challenges include eligibility criteria that restrict access because of substance use, lack of income, or criminal history. Restrictions on bringing in personal items or pets and strict curfews also create hurdles. Some shelters may not accommodate partners or families to remain together or may also impose religious requirements, such as participation in religious services or other spiritual activities. Some people also face physical barriers to entry if they have disabilities and the shelter is unable to accommodate them. In rural areas, people may

struggle to access shelters if transportation options are limited (Nagendra and Moshier McDivitt, 2017).

Low-barrier shelters serve people without imposing prerequisites that could exclude vulnerable populations. In practice, this means they offer shelter to anyone who needs it, regardless of age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or household composition. There are few prerequisites for entry and services are voluntary. Additional considerations include waiving drug or alcohol testing, providing 24-hour access, and allowing people to bring their pets and possessions. In some cases, certain populations (e.g., LGBTQI+, young adults, families, etc.) do not feel welcome in traditional emergency shelters. For example, transgender people may experience mistreatment in shelters because of their gender identity. Some may be forced to leave because of poor or unsafe conditions (Laywell, 2024). Some communities have tried to address this by offering shelters focused on these specific populations.[3] Anecdotal evidence also suggests that people who have lived outside for longer periods of time may be more amenable to non-congregate shelter settings, although further study of this topic is needed. Safety remains a priority in all shelters, so facilities typically maintain strict policies against violence, weapons, or other disruptive behavior (Blasco and Nagendra, 2022).

HUD is interested in understanding how communities are lowering barriers to emergency shelter. In answering this question, proposals may seek to evaluate multiple emergency shelters within a community, pursue a higher-level study of many communities, examine initiatives to improve access for a specific population, or some combination of these activities. Applicants are encouraged to explore communities in urban, suburban, and/or rural areas. Potential areas of focus might include, but are not limited to, investigating best practices for transitioning from high- to low-barrier emergency shelter models; comparing congregate and non-congregate shelter models; identifying common challenges to lowering emergency shelter barriers and how these challenges might be overcome; understanding outcomes; and highlighting promising, low-barrier models.

Question 4: What is known about local community responses to unsheltered homelessness and best practices with respect to encampments, vehicle homelessness, and other forms of unsheltered homelessness?

Four in ten people who experienced homelessness in 2023 were unsheltered (approximately 256,600 individuals), meaning their primary nighttime residence was a public or private place not meant for habitation, including cars, parks, camping grounds, abandoned buildings, or the sidewalk. This is the highest number of people enduring unsheltered conditions since the PIT count's baseline year in 2007. Compared with people who were sheltered, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness were older, and a higher share tended to be White (57 percent vs. 45 percent in the sheltered population). Nearly half (49 percent) of all unsheltered people in the country reside in California (HUD, 2023).

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[3] Rescue Mission Alliance operates the Alejandro Garcia Runaway and Homeless Youth House in Syracuse, New York, which is an emergency shelter for children aged 12-17. Brighton Center operates Homeward Bound in Covington, Kentucky, which is the only emergency shelter for youth under 18 in Northern Kentucky.

Many studies show that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness tend to suffer from chronic disease, serious mental illness, and substance use at higher rates than people who are sheltered. These challenges can be exacerbated by living in unsheltered conditions, including exposure to inclement weather, pollution, and limited access to clean water for drinking, handwashing, and bathing. People who live unsheltered also experience higher mortality rates when compared with sheltered peers. Despite their poorer overall health, people who experience unsheltered homelessness tend to have lower preventative healthcare utilization rates and often lack health insurance (Richards and Kuhn 2022). People who live in communities with camping bans that criminalize sleeping outside can also face fines, criminal charges, and jail. This contributes to a revolving door of homelessness and incarceration (AJPH 2005).

Homeless encampments have been on the rise in larger cities, reflecting the increase in unsheltered homelessness, the lack of affordable housing, and the high cost of living. Encampments are found in many types of locations, including under highway underpasses, in wooded areas, or on inner city sidewalks. While there is no standard definition for encampments, they are typically characterized by the presence of personal possessions, such as tents or grills, and the shared sense of permanency held by the people living there. They also range in size. Some are fewer than 15 people, while others have as many as 200 people. Encampments pose risks to public safety and can negatively impact the surrounding neighborhoods and businesses. They also have implications for the health and wellbeing of the people residing within them (HUD 2021).

Cities are responding to the challenge of encampments in a variety of ways. A 2020 study by Abt Global explored responses across nine cities. One common approach focused on cleaning, clearing, and closing encampments while simultaneously providing residents with needed services and a place to go (HUD 2021). The USICH also identifies 19 strategies for communities to pursue to address current encampments and prevent future encampments. The list includes strategies such as prioritizing closures based on health and safety considerations, engaging neighboring residents and businesses, tracking the status of people housed and yet to be housed, and ensuring residents have access to housing and supportive services (USICH 2024).

HUD is interested in understanding how communities are addressing unsheltered homelessness and best practices with respect to encampments, vehicle homelessness, and other forms of unsheltered homelessness. This includes, but is not limited to, federal, state, and local policy considerations, including the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Grants Pass v. Johnson; how responses to unsheltered homelessness vary by different types of geography and the conditions under which they are best suited; and the cost-effectiveness of different approaches.

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January 2025