

SOCI 336

Investigative Sociology

The Housing First Approach Sonoma County

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Abstract

Senate Bill No. 1380, Section 1 declares, “*California leads the nation in the number of homeless residents with 115,738 people experiencing homelessness at some point, which is 21 percent of the nation’s total. California also leads the nation in the number and ratio of chronically homeless residents with 29,178 chronically homeless residents at any point in time, which is 31 percent of the nation’s total. California also has 10,416 homeless youth, which is 28 percent of the nation’s total.*”

The purpose of the study is to emphasize the importance of the basic human right to shelter by posing the following question: What are the practical measures and associated costs to a Housing First Approach to reduce homelessness in Sonoma County? This research study is evaluating the challenges and contributing factors to Sonoma County’s growing population of 2,500 people in need of housing and support services. The Housing First Approach prioritizes providing shelter to the unhoused and exiting homelessness as quickly as possible before attending to root causes of homelessness including but not limited to mental health and substance abuse. To highlight a core component of the Housing First Policy, Senate Bill No. 1380 states, “applicants are not rejected on the basis of poor credit or financial history, poor or lack of rental history, criminal convictions unrelated to tenancy, or behaviors that indicate a lack of “housing readiness” (Mitchell, 2016). Findings suggest that society's perception of homelessness hinders more than aids the homeless population. Interviews conducted consistently reiterated that there is a vast area of public land in Sonoma County that should be developed into homeless housing and the best strategy is to spread out the housing placements. Once housed, it is key to follow up with support services to integrate the homeless in the surrounding community of Sonoma County. Through both the qualitative and quantitative findings, research indicates that with the correct funding Sonoma County could eradicate homelessness through the Housing First Approach.

*Note: Acknowledging the importance of language like houseless and unhoused, the word 'homeless' is used throughout this research paper for aligning communication with the sources cited in this examination. While many have adopted the term houseless, HUD and other government agencies continue to use homeless, therefore the reader will see this language used throughout.

Introduction

Sonoma County has faced wildfires, a pandemic, and an ongoing housing crisis, and low wages that have left the houseless population growing and extremely vulnerable. It is time that the Sonoma County Community focuses efforts on solutions that will be innovative and long-lasting. Acknowledging the importance of language like houseless and unhoused, the word 'homeless' is used throughout this research paper for aligning communication with the sources cited in this examination. While many have adopted the term houseless, HUD and other government agencies continue to use homeless, therefore the reader will see this language used throughout. To emphasize the importance of basic human rights, The Declaration of Human Rights Article 25 states:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

In 2021, The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office of community planning and development collected data. It found that in Sonoma County, we have a homeless population of 2,657 per capita, and 715 of the people are chronically homeless. We rank second in counties with the largest adult homeless population per capita. Orange County comes in first with a population of 3,790 per capita (Espinoza, 2019). Why are we accepting this? It is each of those 2,745 people' right to shelter. The County is not doing enough. We are not coming together to solve the core issues that cause homelessness, or the government is not

providing the amount of funding we need to execute plans that will make a true impact on shrinking the homeless population. We are treating having shelter, food, and water as a privilege when Article 25 in the Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that it is a right that all humans have (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Housing First Approach policy needs to be fully implemented in Sonoma County. The Housing First Approach prioritizes housing the homeless before attending to other issues, including but not limited to mental health and substance abuse.

While in the past people experiencing homelessness were required to prove their readiness for housing before being given shelter, the Housing First Approach prioritizes shelter before addressing other essential needs such as employment, managing substance use, and physical health (Homelessness in Marin, Housing First 2021). To do this, they had to find employment, work on their substance abuse, and physical health. While these factors are essential, they become much easier to work on when you have a roof over your head. Individuals provided with shelter now have an address to provide when applying for employment and no longer wasting all their energy looking for their next meal or a place to sleep (Homelessness in Marin, *Housing First 2021*).

This research study evaluates the challenges to a housing-first approach for a population of 2,657 individuals in need of housing (Espinoza, 2019). The purpose of the study is to see how much it would cost to properly implement the Housing First Approach in Sonoma County. Additionally, it examines services available for the homeless and the lack of funding to maintain these services beyond temporary support. Our study focuses on a Housing First Approach's practical measures and associated costs to reduce homelessness in Sonoma County. We need a solution to the ever-growing problem of homelessness. The current solutions are nearsighted and

do not hold promise to solve the root causes of homelessness such as low wages and lack of affordable housing. Our goal is to provide a pathway for more housing by examining the costs and reasons for the lack of funding and housing as the population continues to rise without access to basic human needs such as water, food, and shelter.

Literature Review

The Housing First Approach

In order to decrease the number of homeless people in the street, our communities will need a solid Housing First Approach that can provide one with the resources he/she may need. Information about the Housing First Approach is sparse and inaccessible but as a whole it "is an approach to solving homelessness within a community, and the approach prioritizes matching households experiencing homelessness with permanent housing as quickly as possible. Housing should always come before linkage to voluntary support and services" (Mitchell, 2016). What this approach could do for our communities is bring awareness to root causes of homelessness and how every human deserves a right to housing no matter your background. However, in order for the public to get a full understanding of this type of approach, the city would have to start educating the public about what causes homelessness. There are many obstacles when it comes to a Housing First Approach because of active policies by our Federal Government, but what most people don't know is that the Housing First is technically already in place in many California counties and has been effective globally. Countries such as Finland adopted the Housing First Approach nationwide and believe they will eradicate homelessness by 2027 (T. Mahboob, CBC, 2020). Housing First became an official policy in California through the federal HEARTH Act of 2009. This allows for HUD regulations to govern homeless assistance funding at the state level through Senate Bill No. 1380. Per SB 1380 all housing programs are required to

adopt the Housing First model (Mitchell 2016). Once the public knows and understands the Housing First Approach as a whole, we can move forward to housing larger populations faster. To highlight a major component of Housing First Policy, Senate Bill No. 1380 states, “applicants are not rejected on the basis of poor credit or financial history, poor or lack of rental history, criminal convictions unrelated to tenancy, or behaviors that indicate a lack of “housing readiness” (Mitchell, 2016). Another core component of Senate Bill No. 1380 allows for “supportive services that emphasize engagement and problem solving over therapeutic goals and service plans that are highly tenant-driven without predetermined goals. While emphasizing that “the use of alcohol or drugs and of itself, without other lease violations, is not a reason for eviction” (Mitchell, 2016). There are many positive outcomes when it comes to a Housing First Approach and over time as the public becomes more educated on the topic, Data from counties implementing the Housing First Approach suggests the numbers we see now on the homeless population will significantly go down. For example, in Marin County, they have been working with their partner organizations to ensure they have the resources and support they need to implement a Housing First program (Homelessness in Marin, Housing First 2021). Another example is how the North Bay Counties have implemented, "Project Roomkey, which is a partnership that uses funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the State of California, along with city and county funds, to secure hotel and motel rooms for people experiencing homelessness" (Novasky/Morales, 2020). Also, according to Marin County projects that operate on the Housing First Approach house people more quickly than other models, and those people are more likely to remain stably housed. Housing First programs also cost less money than not housing people, due to the cost of emergency services such as jails, hospitals, and shelters (Marin Housing First, 2020). The Housing First Approach for the homeless

population in Sonoma County could be a possible consideration in the future, but as research has shown, there are many obstacles that can get in the way.

Obstacles

Our sense of self is a process of taking on the attitudes of the generalized other, or the wider community, in order to belong to and identify with that specific group (Mead, 1934, p. 143-144). We see ourselves through the eyes of other people to create an identity for ourselves, adopting attitudes that other people in our group hold towards ourselves as well as towards other social groups and phenomena. Consequently, social perception of “out-groups” formulated by “in-groups” has a significant impact on social and political actions taken in regard to that group.

There are many social situations where one may find themselves identifying with an out-group, but for the sake of this discussion, the out-group consists of people who are not housed, and the in-group is people who are housed (Lee et. al., 2004, p. 39). Ideologies about why people become homeless, and the characteristics associated with people experiencing homelessness easily spread throughout in-groups, having a major impact on how local and national governments deal with the issue. The stigma surrounding the experience of homelessness pervades social attitudes and has effects on the formulation of long-term, permanent solutions. Stigmatization is a catastrophic event for one's formulation of identity, as well as how others perceive and treat them. It is the process of “spoiling one's identity and disqualifying one from full social acceptance. Stigma involves both extreme negative perceptions and social rejection of the marked individual” (Phelan Et. al, 1997, p. 323). Because people experiencing homelessness

have no choice but to sleep and live-in areas where they are constantly exposed to the public eye, homelessness is considered to be “more disruptive than other forms of poverty” (Phelan et. al, 1997, p. 325). Their visibility and susceptibility to public scrutiny is why we see so much criminalization and relocation of homeless people instead of actual help. The appearance of someone experiencing homelessness amid a community where most people are housed may disrupt many people’s image of what their community should look like, causing people to view them as a nuisance or a threat. Some homeless people do not have access to sanitary facilities, possibly causing them to look or smell unclean, or urinate or defecate in public places (Donley, 2008, p. 16). This disruption of the societal norm of presenting oneself in an aesthetically pleasing way is what many use to justify their communities’ disregard for homeless people. This disruption can be further used to justify the way in which people experiencing homelessness are often talked about as if they are an invasive species that needs to be dealt with, rather than human beings who have fallen on hard times. Although most people do not hold any hatred toward people experiencing homelessness, fears developed towards these people about perceived tendencies towards criminal behavior, cleanliness, and impact their presence may have on neighborhood property values has caused many well-intentioned people to develop NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) attitudes (Donley, 2008, p. 17). Many people are against people being homeless, but also do not want to be a part of the solution. Consequently, these attitudes and perceptions are significant reasons as to why organizations working to house people may struggle to obtain funding, or struggle to establish affordable housing or tiny house projects even once funding is obtained.

Criminalization of Homelessness

From a public standpoint there is a limited extent to what community members know about the causes of homelessness. Over time the Government has quietly put policies and laws into place that immobilized the efforts to house those who are most at-risk. Perhaps the most popular example of a housing policy with unintended consequences for homelessness, is that of legal controls on rental prices of moderate to lower income residential apartment units (Tarst, 2021). This isn't just something that is done at a judicial level, it can be seen on a municipal level as well. Municipalities enact laws criminalizing homelessness because these laws are a politically convenient response to complaints by property owners about the presence of nearby people experiencing homelessness. This ties back to the fact that there are policies in place landlords are legally required to follow, making it nearly impossible for those in need of low-income housing to find housing in a desired neighborhood (Tarst, 2021). Another way the system has found a way to criminalize homeless individuals is through the lack of counting each homeless individual and making sure no one is left out. In recent years, many critics point to the fact that HUD's Point in Time (PIT) estimate only looks at individuals experiencing homelessness in shelters and sight-counts of unsheltered individuals on a given night; this methodology ignores individuals who are not visible during the night of the count, individuals who are temporarily doubled up with friends or family, as well as individuals temporarily housed in institutions, such as hospitals or jails (Tarst, 2021). Over time, the public has watched silently as the Government and NGOs criminalize the homeless population. Governments ironically continue to criminalize conditions and activities, such as homelessness, to which governments themselves systematically and pervasively causally contribute (Wright, 1999). The criminalization will continue to go on until there is change seen in the system, such as a shift to

the Housing First Approach, and when that happens, we can start to see smaller numbers in our annual Homeless Reports.

COVID-19

This pandemic has opened up a new perspective of the “mental health crisis,” and what that has done to those experiencing homelessness. The new social-distancing guidelines during the midst of the pandemic made it nearly impossible for people to find shelters. Additionally, “those who are sheltered face overcrowding and the risk of spreading the virus through shared bathrooms and common areas, whereas those who are unsheltered, on the streets or in encampments, face unsanitary conditions caused by close quarters, lack of facilities, and lack of access to medical care” (Novasky/Morales, 2020). This brought on many other risks for those who suffered from mental illnesses and needed access to medical care and proper services to keep them on track. Not being able to provide for every homeless individual that posed a serious health risk to themselves or others, damaged the communities all over California. However, this pandemic did bring forward the dire need to focus on medical care that can help everyone in need, even if they have declared homelessness.

Recently the United Nations highlighted the likelihood of a worldwide “mental health crisis” resulting from the economic stress, isolation, and disruption in mental health services caused by COVID-19 and the need for social distancing (Novasky/Morales, 2020).

How to Change Social Perception of Homelessness

In order to find permanent solutions to homelessness, it is crucial to change overarching societal attitudes towards people who are experiencing homelessness. In a study done by Barrett A. Lee (2004), it was found that the contact hypothesis reigns true when dealing with attitudes

towards homelessness. The contact hypothesis states that “[increased] contact between members of an in-group and an out-group is expected to improve the attitudes of the former toward the latter by replacing in-group ignorance with first-hand knowledge that disconfirms stereotypes” (Lee et. al., 2004, p. 40). When conducting surveys and interviews with people at different levels of exposure to homeless people, attitudes were measured based on nine indicators which gives a baseline measurement of whether the individual possesses positive or negative attitudes towards homelessness. Negative attitudes are reflected by statements or sentiments that attribute reasons for homelessness to agency of the homeless individual, while positive attitudes are reflected by structural reasoning for homelessness. Research showed that as levels of exposure increased from information gathered from third party sources to direct observation of homeless people, to direct interaction with homeless people, to membership of oneself or a loved one in the homeless group, attitudes became increasingly positive (Lee et. al., 2004, p. 40). This means that increased interaction between housed and unhoused people could elicit more empathy for unhoused individuals and could be the first step in changing how the public votes and where they put their money. The main obstacle that has prevented the implementation of not just housing first, but many other attempts to alleviate homelessness as well, is the pervasive stigmas that hinder unhoused people as well as the seemingly ineffective efforts to solve this problem that have been tried in the past and present. These negative ideologies do not just affect how people vote, but arguably more importantly, affect the attitudes of stakeholders who may hold the key to funding huge projects to alleviate the housing crisis. Housing First Approach is a relatively new concept that may be scary and risky to a stakeholder, who may have preconceived notions of the nature of homeless people, as well as solutions that are perceived to work and not work (Davidson,

2006, p. 130). Regardless of the methods used to obtain funding, social perceptions play a key role in whether or not problems are tackled in an effective manner.

Another study among fourth- and fifth-year medical students shows another way we can change people's perspectives on working towards a permanent solution for our housing crisis. Students were required to take a two-week mandatory educational program on providing proper care and understanding of the needs of homeless individuals. They were given a questionnaire that measured their general attitudes towards homeless people. After the course was taken, students took the same questionnaire again, and the results found improvements in two crucial categories. Students who took this course showed an increased willingness to associate with homeless people, as well as displaying attitudes that reflect more societal, structural causes for homelessness (Buchanan et. al., 2004, p. 567). Empathy and a positive attitude are crucial to providing proper care for the homeless, whether it is medical or social care. This study shows that increased interaction and integration is not the only way to elicit empathy. Informing and educating people about structural causes of homelessness could be the first step in helping society adopt positive attitudes towards vulnerable individuals, *worthy* of our tax money and of a housing first solution.

These two studies show us that the key to unlocking empathy towards homeless people, and therefore offering permanent solutions, is to increase interaction between housed and non-housed people. Additionally, education on the reasons why people may find themselves without a home is a key factor for unlocking empathy. In places where a Housing First Approach has not been tried or even considered, equipping citizens with informative and humanizing facts may cause people to be more open to a housing first solution. Preconceived ideas and social perceptions of specific groups shape how we see the world and how we treat people and the

causes we passionately fight for. Whether you are a voter or a stakeholder, positive, uplifting attitudes regarding possible solutions to homelessness are extremely important in working together to implement a housing first solution.

Methodology

Our research study set out to find the practical measures and associated costs to a housing-first approach to reduce homelessness in Sonoma County. We conducted twenty interviews with influential local government officials and non-profit members involved in providing support to homeless people through policymaking, funding distribution, or direct services. We received qualitative resources from a couple of our interviewees on the cost of different units, benefits, housing programs, affordable housing programs, local government budgets on homelessness projects and services.

We conducted interviews that consisted of thirteen total questions. The questions focused on Housing First Approach, different types of unit pricing, Sonoma County services for the homeless and budgeting for dealing with the homeless crisis. A few examples of questions included in the interview are:

What kind of units would be needed for a homeless individual versus a homeless family?

Would it be more cost-effective to build apartment complex units to house the homeless or smaller units in various sites of land scattered through Sonoma County?

In what ways, if any, do societal attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness aid or hinder the process of executing a housing first solution (See Appendix A)?

The aim was to interview twenty experts on the topic of homelessness in Sonoma County or nearby counties. We specifically choose people who have experience working with the homeless community providing services and housing or were part of the local government. We chose to interview non-profit members because they could provide us with the point of view of

working with the government for funding and how lack of finances causes a lack of needed vital social services their clients require. Interviewing local government officials provided our research with insight into how Sonoma County is interacting with the homelessness crisis and their struggles in coming up with viable solutions. Since we are still going through a pandemic, our interviews had to be conducted over zoom or by phone. Most interviews were between thirty minutes to an hour-long, and the identity of our interviewees will be kept confidential throughout our study.

To be able to address our research question, we need both quantitative and qualitative data. We had two primary data collectors. One conducted the interviews, and the other took detailed notes. We audio-recorded our interviewees to be able to go back and gather more details if needed. Our quantitative data allowed us to see the number of homeless people, demographics, and the overall cost of getting the entire homeless population housed in Sonoma County. The qualitative data gave us information on what services are being provided to the homeless population and what we are missing regarding services in Sonoma County.

Findings

Sonoma County is currently dealing with one of the most pressing homelessness issues in the state. The county ranks second in terms of homelessness per capita in California (Espinoza, 2019), and seems to be continually circling the drain in search of answers on how to get people the help they need while navigating a political minefield. Research shows that a direct housing first approach is the best method in order to tackle this problem, and the question that we are posing is this: What are the practical measures and associated costs to a housing-first approach to reduce homelessness in Sonoma County? Through interviews with local county officials and program coordinators, along with research articles from the county, our research team from

Sonoma State University has been able to put together a clearer picture of where municipal governments and nonprofit organizations stand in being able to make the necessary progress towards providing the basic human right of shelter to all.

Quantitative Findings

According to a representative of the Community Support Network, or CSN, there are over 2,657 homeless people who are currently living within Sonoma County without proper shelter. The Housing First Approach aims primarily to get people into stable housing and then move on to addressing their other needs, some of which include mental health services, job placement, and substance abuse counseling and rehabilitation.

The first challenge that many organizations around the county face are funding for upkeep costs within developments such as Los Guillicos village. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) devotes federal funding, a figure that is reported at \$5 billion (hud.gov), in order to help place the homeless population into housing situations. However, from our research, we understand that this money is wrapped up in very rigid ways, including how it can be spent, and where it can be spent (hud.gov). Through an interview with a specialist who works in relation to HUD, we learned that Sonoma County has applied for an estimated \$400 million of funding for homeless projects. There are a few different options when looking at possible housing solutions around Sonoma County, one of them being Project Homekey, which purchases and rehabilitates buildings such as hotels and transforms them into livable units. One figure our research group received from a council member of a local town was upwards of \$220,000 per unit, many of which are congregate, not including the price to purchase the hotel first or operating costs.

Another possible solution is the tiny home village. To put the financial commitment needed on housing first, our group looked at San Francisco, where the city is building a village of 70 tiny homes, which are 64 sq ft each, and the total price is roughly \$1.7 million. The breakdown in costs differs, as the average size of an apartment bedroom is roughly 219 sq ft each, and these tiny homes are a little over ¼ the size.

A solution that is currently being utilized by Marin County, which could possibly be a jumping-off point for Sonoma County, is rapid housing vouchers. From an interview with an employee at Marin Homeless Clinic, our team has learned that they have received a massive amount of funding that is directed towards these rapid housing vouchers, which cover all or a portion of rent for homeless individuals. In terms of financial availability of housing vouchers for Sonoma County, as of Sept. 30th, 2021, there had been \$14.5 million allocated for rent relief and rapid housing, and an additional \$13.8 million of funding added on Oct. 31st, 2021 (sonomacounty.ca.gov). While there is no set monetary number on these vouchers, the average claim for rent relief per application is \$9,626.69 (sonomacounty.ca.gov) which helps to provide rent relief through Section 8. Section 8 offers assistance to low-income families and individuals for rent and basic necessities.

According to a specialist associated with Opening Doors Marin, costs skyrocket when you factor in all of the necessary care costs for a homeless client. These inelastic costs may include housing vouchers, case managers, social and health services. It can cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$30,000 for an individual to maintain a housed status for a full year. While all of these solutions come with large price tags, the general consensus from our expert interviews is that while the resources are available and very useful in conjunction with each other, accessing them and getting multiple organizations to work together is resulting in a pivotal roadblock.

Qualitative Findings

Our findings demonstrate that in Sonoma County there is not enough funding to house every individual that is struggling with homelessness and that the solution goes beyond just housing homeless individuals. More funding is necessary to ensure that any homeless person who needs a home has one. This should absolutely be the first step. After interviewing almost twenty individuals who have experience and knowledge about the homeless population, it is evident that a variety of services offered to those who struggle with the issue of homelessness is a necessity when it comes to successful long-term housing. In an interview with a member from COTS in Petaluma who coordinates the housing, shelter, and service programs with the homeless, they stated that the best way to combat homelessness is to provide more affordable housing, more mental health support to struggling individuals, and support to other issues that these people encounter. Finding a way to help individuals who struggle with one or more of these issues can be a great starting point to better the outcome of housing the homeless to transition into a more permanent housing solution. The interviewee also believes that there is enough public land to house homeless people but there is “not enough will” from the community which holds the necessary resources, such as building more housing structures, to make this happen.

Our research suggests that Sonoma County needs a plan that is set in place before they can use the money that they are given to aid the homeless population. Strategically planning how this money and the distribution of this funding is utilized, is difficult because there is just not enough money for all the necessary components. With more funding, much more could be accomplished. A member of the Sonoma County committee that coordinates housing for the homeless in the community, explains that funding is extremely restrictive. They also include that

if the funding was more flexible, there could be different options to house the homeless. Tiny home villages or safe RV parking lots are just a couple of examples of this.

An individual who works closely with CSN (*Community Support Network*) in Sonoma County, which has been the county's leader in supportive housing for fifty years, explains that housing first should not be a one size fits all approach. Many other factors need to be considered when housing people who are homeless and struggling. For example, the interview discussed how there are many homeless individuals that struggle with mental health issues and addiction, so making sure that providing services to these people is necessary for a long-term solution. Client centered care is extremely useful due to the number of individuals who do struggle with mental health and addiction. Therefore, this approach (client centered care) could be extremely efficient. There was a common theme with the interviews conducted that suggested providing resources as essential to aid the homeless population. Housing First is a starting point but making sure it's permanent supportive housing is essential. Taking away from what was said during interviews, it is evident that analyzing and understanding where homeless people need assistance, sets the foundation for a long-term solution that can be so much more successful.

A contributing factor that gets in the way of housing is society's perception of the homeless population. Our accumulative findings suggest that society's perception of homelessness hinders more than aids the homeless population. Some people are uncomfortable with the thought of housing homeless individuals in their community for a variety of reasons, so utilizing public land and finding places to house the homeless is another factor that is restricting. Getting everyone on the same page and establishing that people should be off the streets and into a home, is crucial. With more funding, services for the homeless, and community support, housing for the homeless population can be implemented much more efficiently.

Overview

Our research team originally set out with the goal to provide a conclusive solution to Sonoma County's homelessness crisis, and after speaking with over twenty qualified professionals and experts, we can say that while housing first is an ideal solution, no single proposal should be treated as the perfect solution for every single individual. The key to properly applying housing first, and solving the homelessness crisis, is an open collaboration between the countless nonprofits and municipal governments. Through our interviews, we met a vast network of people providing services ranging from handing out food, to rent assistance and transitional housing. As for the cost of housing first, we found that according to a publication from September 2015 titled *A Policy Maker's Toolbox for Ending Homelessness*, the total cost of housing first, including operating costs, can be roughly estimated at between \$750 million at the least and \$1 billion at the most, an inclusive price that covers physical housing, case workers, health care and long-term support.

Discussion

Our findings show that the funding needed to solve the homelessness problem in Sonoma County is difficult to access. The County must have a plan for the grants they are applying for, and even then, the funding through Project Homekey currently focuses on tiny homes or acquiring buildings and hotels. While it is not a bad thing to create more housing options for the homeless population, this leads to a gap in funding for supportive services. If homeless individuals have been placed in housing, but without supportive services, this endangers them to end up back on the street. In our findings, we can also see temporary solutions. We can see this in the creation of Los Guilicos Village and the tiny village currently being built on the property of the Mary Issac Center. While these tiny villages are an excellent alternative for congregant

shelters, they are a stopgap. Funding should be allocated to permanent solutions such as permanent supportive housing, rent vouchers, and affordable housing.

When facing a complex issue such as homelessness, Sonoma County is trying to figure out various solutions to solve this problem. Marin County is an example of the great success that the Housing First Approach can provide. Opening Doors Marin has housed 416 chronically homeless individuals since October 1st, 2017, and 94% of those individuals have remained housed today. Marin's approach focuses on identifying the most vulnerable in the homeless community, scattered-site housing, and housing vouchers. Marin uses the Coordinated Entry system, which ensures that people experiencing homelessness receive the services they need (marincounty.ca.gov). Using a Vulnerability Index - Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT), homeless individuals are assessed by a provider site. The score they receive indicates (0-3) does not require housing intervention, (4-7) recommended for Rapid Rehousing, (8+) for individuals, and (9+) for families recommended for permanent supportive housing (Coordinated Entry FAQ Sheet). Non-profit members from Marin explain that using Coordinated Entry allows the entire county to be on the same page and prioritize homeless individuals that are the most vulnerable in their community

A non-profit member explained that scatter site housing is supportive housing units that are dispersed throughout a community. Marin does this by offering housing in private apartment complexes throughout Marin County for individuals in need of shelter. Rent vouchers in Marin to house individuals have led to much of their success in lowering their homeless population. Rent vouchers are a rental subsidy that helps homeless individuals afford rent. The individual with the rent vouchers contributes 30% of their income to rent, and the vouchers cover the rest (Open Doors Marin). This allows individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and episodic

homeless to regain stability quicker, but it also helps chronic homeless get into housing. Sonoma County does engage with homelessness similarly to Marin County, so why have we not seen the same success?

When it comes to homelessness in Sonoma County, there are two program types: programs that manage the problem and programs that aim to solve the homelessness crisis. Programs that are aimed to manage homelessness are different types of shelters seen across the county such as Los Guilicos Village, Parking Safe, and Congregant Shelters. They are meant to give people time to regroup, rest and seek out the services they need. Los Guilicos Village is located in Santa Rosa and has 60 individual units of 64 sq feet and offers wrap-around services on-site (*Los Guilicos Shelter Village for people experiencing homelessness 2021*). When speaking to a Santa Rosa Government Official they informed us of the Parking Safe program. Park Safe is designed to allow people to live in their vehicles with a safe place to park and receive the assistance they need. Currently, 52% of the homeless population lives in their cars. A Congregant Shelter is a facility that offers individuals experiencing homelessness a place to sleep, eat, take care of their hygiene needs, and set them up with services they need. Congregant shelters are what most of the population is familiar with, but these shelters can fill up quickly leaving others searching for a place to get out of the cold for the night.

When interviewing a Petaluma Government official, they explained that the primary purpose of these managing programs is to remove barriers for getting people off the streets to receive services that will lead them to become stable and into semi-permanent housing. Those programs would be affordable housing, rent vouchers, and permanent supportive housing. Sonoma County also uses the Coordinated Entry System and the VI-SPDAT (Vulnerability Index - Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) to prioritize its most vulnerable county-

wide, allowing for expedited access to housing and services. Sonoma County is presently focusing on moving towards rent vouchers and affordable housing because projects such as the tiny villages for the homeless are expensive for a project that offers temporary housing. Each unit in Guilicos' cost \$8,300 with sixty-two units and \$3,000 per resident. Guilicos is a sixty-person capacity shelter making the total cost approximately \$694,600 per year (Silvy,2020). What Sonoma County needs is more permanent supportive housing and easier access to affordable housing.

Recommendations

Homelessness is a multi-faceted issue that is hard for any community to resolve. Sonoma County having one of the largest homeless populations per capita makes ending homelessness seem like an impossible feat. We saw areas in which we believe that Sonoma County could improve in its dealings with the homeless crisis through our research. When speaking to a Santa Rosa Government official about Safe Parking, they informed us that originally Santa Rosa had planned for one Safe Parking lot per district adding up to seven Safe Parking lots. The community of Santa Rosa was accepting of providing places for the homeless. Still, once the sites were near their neighborhoods, they objected to the Parking Safe lots, and the County was only able to have one Park Safe lot in a government-owned parking lot. Our research showed that the community's negative perception of the homeless community has caused projects that are meant to help the homeless receive significant public push back. That is the complication Sebastopol is facing as it tries to provide an RV village a safe parking program to be located in a vacant property on Gravenstein Highway North (Varian,2021). Our team encourages educational community programs to facilitate the integration of the homeless population back into the Sonoma County Community. The Founder and President Annie Falandes, of Homeless Action

Sonoma (HAS) vision, sets out to achieve education and integration of the homeless population into Sonoma County. It is the focal point of their three programs, community dinners, Be-Friend, and Professional services. HAS is facilitating the housed and unhoused population to interact and to learn from one another. HAS believes that by bringing both communities together, we can create trust and connection in the community (*Homeless Action Sonoma* 2020). Programs that encourage integration between the homeless population and the housed must be supported by government funding and local government. It has been proven through Barrett A. Lee's contact hypothesis in 2004 that an increase in exposure to an "out-group" such as the homeless would change the "in-groups," in this case the housed populations' biases and negative stereotypes they held about the homeless population. People become more empathic, which could positively impact how Sonoma County reacts to the placement of the homeless population within the County and programs like Safe Parking (Davidson, 2006, p. 130).

Sonoma County has already begun to shift in the direction of Rent Vouchers, and if they continue to provide them and receive more funding, they could help lower the number of homeless. We recommend that Sonoma County focus its fundings and efforts on providing more permanent housing, which will come hand in hand with their new shift in the usage of Rent Vouchers. While we get why temporary housing is used, it is a managing solution, and right now, we need to move away from managing and focus on solutions that will solve the homelessness crisis.

A non-profit member and many local government officials stated that there is a gap in funding. The funding they needed to offer wrap-around services is not being provided by the government, leaving Sonoma County to seek solutions to this lack of funding. When we spoke to a non-profit located in Petaluma, they explained that Sonoma County needs to be better at

spreading programs and services county-wide. They stated that there is a concentration of homeless programs located in Santa Rosa because they have the most homeless in the county. South of the County is not covered under the umbrella of these programs and the services they provide Santa Rosa. Leaving the South of the county which consists of Petaluma, Cotati and Rohnert Park with fewer programs and services to meet the needs of their homeless population.

HUD in the past funded programs for transitional housing. Transitional housing are group homes with temporary supportive accommodations that are meant to close the gap between homelessness and permanent housing. When the first housing approach was implemented, HUD removed financing to these types of programs. These programs allowed people the time to acclimate living in a home once again. The residents of this transitional housing paid 30% of their income into rent and received the services they needed to prepare them for permanent housing. The individuals were helped with structured living with income development, addiction issues and life skills. The residents were part of this transitional housing program for about a year and then moved to permanent housing. By allowing chronically homeless people to be costume to once more living in a home and help them gain essential skills we improve their chances of them staying housed. Transitional programs allow for individuals that are not fully suited to live on their own to begin to claim their independence but with support and structure in a house setting. Which is why HUD should once more fund these programs that allow homeless individuals an option of housing that prepares them for permanent housing.

While we do have services in Sonoma County, there is still not enough funding to ensure all homeless individuals receive the services they require. We recommend the government of California expand its budget when it comes to homelessness to fund wrap-around services that will secure these individuals remain housed. This would allow the local government to provide

case works, substance abuse programs, work skill workshops, mental and physical services to homeless individuals.

Conclusion

Through both the qualitative and quantitative findings, our group's research shows that with the correct funding Sonoma County could take after many other places and eradicate homelessness through the Housing First approach. When looking at the success of Marin County and other countries like Finland, it is easy to see that a Housing First approach is the most effective. The fact that Sonoma is working towards permanent and affordable housing, rent vouchers, and supportive services means there is a possibility that with the proper funding and utilization of that funding, homelessness in Sonoma County could disappear in a few years.

However, this can only happen if the funding is flexible enough to allow for permanent housing solutions rather than temporary ones. Our study found that Sonoma has applied for around 400 million dollars of approximately 5 billion dollars of federal funding for homeless housing (hud.gov). While this seems to solve the homelessness housing problem, strict requirements for these funds may not support the Housing First approach. Our research shows that properly implementing the Housing First approach will not happen all at once but instead be spread over several years. As stated in the "Findings" portion of this research study, the overall cost to implement a Housing First approach could range between \$750 million to \$1 billion in Sonoma County.

This research study is essential because it focuses on helping 2,657 vulnerable individuals in Sonoma County. Everyone deserves housing and services equally, including individuals suffering from either chronic or temporary homelessness. Getting people off the streets and into permanent housing situations is beneficial to everyone within Sonoma County.

The most important aspect of a Housing First program is not only to provide permanent housing but also to provide services. Our study shows that Housing First will not solve all the problems that a homeless individual suffers from, but it is a great starting point. Without a home, homeless individuals may not be able to look for and apply for employment. They do not have a definite place to sleep each night. They are suffering from other mental health or addiction issues because they are unable to get help. By researching what is necessary for a Housing First approach, there could be steps towards making this happen in Sonoma County and solving homelessness.

Our research team supports the idea of a Housing First approach in conjunction with wrap around services in Sonoma County. We believe that everyone, homeless or not, has the right to food and shelter. Although Housing First may not be a singular overall solution, Sonoma needs to take the first steps towards solving homelessness. Homeless individuals need a permanent living space to apply for jobs, receive care for mental illnesses, and recover from addiction. Through the proper funding and the collaboration of governments, non-profits, and the needs of the homeless community, the Housing First approach could be as successful in Sonoma as it has been in Marin County and Finland.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

Introductory Paragraph

Hello, we are (interviewers names). We are sociology majors from Sonoma State. We are currently working with Professor Peter Phillips on a research study on the cost of a housing-first approach as a possible solution for Sonoma County's homelessness problem. The housing first approach prioritizes housing the homeless before attending to other issues including but not limited to mental health and substance abuse. We will be interviewing many local homelessness experts to give us more insight into our research. This study will be published but your identity will be kept anonymous to the public. The interview will take 10-15 minutes. Are you willing to continue?

Background Question

- Tell us a bit about your job position and your responsibilities pertaining to the homelessness crisis?
- How many years have you been working with the homeless population?
- What are some of your organization's biggest accomplishments in alleviating homelessness?

Standardized Interview Questions

1. What does a housing first approach look like to you?
2. Will a housing-first approach be a viable option for the homeless population in Sonoma County?
3. To your knowledge, has the housing first approach or anything similar ever been tried in this region?
4. What sort of resources are needed for a housing-first approach to homelessness in Sonoma County?
5. In what ways, if any, do societal attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness aid or hinder the process of executing a housing first solution?

6. Is there anything else that you feel still needs to be done to combat the issue of homelessness in Marin County, and what are some effective ways to ensure that this solution is implemented?
7. Are there enough public land sites in Sonoma County that could accommodate housing for 2500 people?
8. What are some examples, if any, that have utilized public land and built residential units for the homeless?
9. What do you estimate the cost of units of 300 square feet will be for the homeless population in Sonoma County?
10. Would a 250 to 300 square foot unit be comfortable for a single homeless individual?
11. What kind of units would be needed for a homeless individual versus a homeless family?
12. Would it be more cost-effective to build apartment complex units to house the homeless or smaller units in various sites of land scattered through Sonoma County?
13. California's budget this year will include \$74.4 billion to pay for 30 housing and homelessness programs. How much of the money the county will receive should go to housing first programs in Sonoma County to decrease the homeless population?