

What gaps exist between the services offered by shelter and transitional housing programs and the long-term needs of unhoused residents in Alameda County?

Homelessness is often labelled by numbers, but many people don't realize that each number represents real people trying to rebuild their lives. Many programs help with housing, but housing a person and helping them rebuild their life are very different things. When people hear 'homeless' they usually tend to visualize someone on the streets and sleeping outside. While emergency shelters are very significant, it is only one small part in recovering people from homelessness. Shelters around the country and in Alameda County are the beginning of the recovery process, but not the end or a final solution. Having a bed for one night or with a temporary limit is not a guarantee that someone will still have a home a few months later. Even after someone goes to a shelter, they might still struggle with employment, finding permanent affordable housing, mental health support, and healthcare. Homelessness isn't just not having housing, it very commonly involves many challenges that exist outside of everyday necessities. This is why long-term stability is just as important, or even more important, than temporary shelter. From this issue, this question arises: what gaps exist between the services offered by shelter and transitional housing programs and the long-term needs of unhoused residents in Alameda County? Though Alameda County provides many valuable homelessness services, affordable housing, long-term case management, and coordination between agencies remain the three major gaps that need to be addressed through increased collaboration to strengthen the long-term stability of homeless individuals.

Alameda County has been and will continue to invest the resources given by the government into homelessness. There are shelters, transitional housing, outreach teams, healthcare providers, government programs, and nonprofits. However, helping people get temporary shelter versus helping them stay permanently housed can be the real issue. It is important to recognize if current homelessness services and programs in Alameda County actually continue helping people even after the primary action of getting them off the streets is completed. Though the current emergency services do solve temporary problems, long-term stability is the real challenge. Alameda County's local governments and nonprofits have

worked to address homelessness, but the important question is whether the resources are being utilized to result in long-term solutions.

Alameda County covers most of the East Bay in California, and has about 8,201 homeless individuals according to the point-in-time count from 2026 (Alameda County Health 1). Many services exist already to help the homelessness crisis across the county, and many individuals and volunteers dedicate their time to ameliorating the problem. Alameda County Health Housing and Homelessness Services (H&H) coordinates access points at Housing Resource Centers (HRC), shelters tailored towards women/domestic violence victims, and Coordinated Entry points (Alameda County Health 7). Many separate organizations other than H&H also work to help the issue, such as Bay Area Community Services, Homeless Action Center, and Operation Dignity. These programs and their efforts show that Alameda County as a whole realizes homelessness as a real and important issue. However, despite these efforts, and with certain increases and decreases in severity of the issue, homelessness has stayed a relevant problem. Research has shown that the problem in this county isn't whether services exist or are in operation; it's whether resources are effectively used and if more people are able to move to permanent stability. According to the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center, an integral part of improving homelessness is "having increased personnel and resources dedicated to addressing homelessness. Having staff responsible for addressing homelessness, rather than implementing specific programs, would help the County set a vision for how it can reduce homelessness, establish concrete goals and performance measures, and determine how its various programs and initiatives fit into a larger vision" (Brown et al. 30). Though there are people that work diligently to improve specifically the issue of homelessness, strategies like strengthening the county's Interagency Homelessness Working Group are encouraged to effectively use leadership, coordination, and resources. Multiple programs in place do not undoubtedly mean every person is able to be successful. This is where investigating the biggest gaps that still remain within the County's homelessness response system becomes crucial.

Further expanding on this issue, the existing system for homelessness support is needed and will continue to be, as it sets a foundation for further improvement. The County does not rely on only one organization to address homelessness, but instead consists of multiple different county departments, outreach programs, and nonprofit organizations. A specific plan that leads Alameda County is Home Together, the “strategic plan for building a coordinated homeless response system that can meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness and reduce racial disparities” (Alameda County Health 6). In other words, it is a countywide strategy aimed at long-term planning and collaboration to improve the housing crisis. Coordinated Entry is “an approach to coordination and management of the crisis response system’s resources that allows users to make equity consistent decisions from available information to connect people efficiently and effectively to interventions that will end their homelessness” (Alameda County Health 7). Its goals are to give people access to the appropriate services they need and prioritize people based on vulnerability factors. One more is Homeless Management Information System, a “local information technology system used to collect participant-level data and data on the provision of housing and services to individuals and families at risk of and experiencing homelessness” (EveryOne Home 2). HMIS tracks effects of programs, shares information, evaluates numbers, and more. All of these services show the county’s efforts and commitment to improving homelessness services and alleviating the problem, not just one of responses. The County has also recognized the need for coordination, as the recommendation from Brown et al. states: “Several stakeholders suggested that one way to strengthen homeless coordination within County government would be to have dedicated staff to support this working group.” (Brown et al. 30). The debate is whether this implementation has fully addressed people’s long-term needs and works toward fully resolving the issue for the future. Even though Alameda County has developed a huge support system, understanding how people in real life move through that system is what helps explain where the long-term challenges lie.

To go into specifics, Alameda County's structured homelessness response system is meant to help individuals move from the state of emergency to long-term housing stability. Through Coordinated Entry, people are connected with services based on their specific needs. Emergency shelters can give necessities like temporary housing, food, hygiene supplies, case management, employment assistance, and other services. Additionally, after meeting those needs, the services are meant to help people start rebuilding their life stability. As Gloria Gregory, Alameda County Tri-Valley Liaison Director, explained during an interview, shelters often are much more than temporary housing. They also connect clients with services such as case management, help with employment, and counseling. Case managers work with clients to find their biggest challenges, connect them with available resources, and develop plans for getting to permanent housing. Depending on each person's circumstances, individuals might receive support. This ranges from healthcare, mental health services, and substance abuse treatment to transportation and employment resources. These aren't permanent solutions; instead, these services are meant to prepare individuals for transitioning into stable homes. Afterward, many people move into temporary or transitional housing while trying to get to permanent housing. Transitional housing provides people with more time and stability than an emergency shelter. This is shown to be extremely helpful while they search for permanent housing. Many people keep working with case managers, looking for housing programs, finding employment, or addressing personal issues that may have been factors in their homelessness during this time. In the end, the long-term goal is for individuals to be able to move into permanent housing so that they can maintain stability. Most importantly, without returning to homelessness. Additionally, Alameda County's Home Together initiative emphasizes collaboration with service providers, improving long-term housing outcomes, and coordinated planning and shared goals. Although this system is aimed at helping people move from emergency shelters to permanent housing. Successfully going through each stage most often depends on being able to consistently access resources and support. As a result, going into the homelessness response system is only the first step, and getting

long-term stability is much more challenging when individuals start to go into the transition toward permanent housing.

Even though emergency shelters and transitional housing programs give people a safe place to stay, they don't solve the biggest problem. This unresolved issue is finding homes that people can actually afford to keep. Shelters are meant to be temporary, so eventually people have to leave and find permanent housing. However, if there are not enough affordable homes available, many people have to stay in temporary programs longer or even have to go back to being homeless. A huge part of this is that housing prices in Alameda County have been consistently increasing. Dylan Sweeney, Alameda County's Housing Policy and Program manager, explained that the biggest cause of homelessness in Alameda County is the lack of affordable housing, not health or behavior itself. He said, "The cost of housing has increased faster than low-income people's incomes can keep up", which is a huge driver of more homelessness. This shows that shelters have limits. They help people get back on their feet, but if there is nowhere affordable for them to go after, it becomes much harder to be stable. People who aren't currently homeless, who are working, looking for housing, and using resources can struggle because housing prices are too high. Research supports what Sweeney explained. According to Brown et al's report on homelessness in Alameda County, there are only about 40 housing units that are affordable enough for every 100 very low-income households. The report also found that a person that earns minimum wage would have to work around 159 hours every week to be able to pay for a two-bedroom apartment in Alameda County (Brown et al 32). These numbers show that it's very difficult for people to leave being homeless. Even when they are trying, a person can have a job but still not make enough money to afford their rent. Because of this, many people are forced to stay in shelters or transitional housing longer than they really should. This is not because they don't want to move on their own. It is because there are just not enough affordable places to live. This problem has been there for many years. The Alameda Countywide Shelter and Services Survey found that **90.3% of people that were surveyed said affordable housing was one of their biggest challenges.** Many people also said they needed transportation, employment help, and access to public benefits. This shows that homelessness is not just having a place to sleep for the night.

people need homes they can afford to keep after. Many services that are available at shelters only provide temporary help instead of lasting stability. Affordable housing is the biggest challenge, but another important gap is also making sure people continue to get the support they need after they leave an initial emergency shelter.

Finding affordable housing is the biggest challenge, but it is not the only challenge. After someone finds temporary shelter, they usually still need support while they work to be permanently housed. Homelessness is connected to many different challenges, including finding employment, getting healthcare, accessing transportation, managing mental health, or applying for benefits. These problems can't be solved in just a few days or as a one-off issue. They instead need guidance from people who use the resources that are available to help individuals navigate them. During an interview, Gloria Gregory explained that shelters do a lot more than just provide a bed for the night. She especially emphasized on case management, saying that people often don't bother to stay in touch with the people they advise during case management, but she also explained how important it is to be present throughout each individual's case management process. This is because it gives people someone to help them work through the many challenges they have to face even after going to a shelter. However, that support is not always available for as long as people need it. A lot of the time after individuals leave an emergency shelter, they still struggle to find housing, maintain employment, or continue receiving services. If they don't have the reassurance of getting consistent support, it becomes increasingly easier for someone to lose progress and return to homelessness. Research also supports the importance of long-term support. The Alameda Countywide Shelter and Services Survey found that many people needed transportation, employment assistance, and access to benefits, after affordable housing. These findings show that homelessness is not only caused by just one problem. Therefore, solving homelessness need more than providing temporary shelter: people need continued guidance while they work to become financially stable and permanently housed. Alameda County strengthening its long-term case management would help make sure that individuals continue receiving support, instead of being left to go through these challenges on their own.

As mentioned before, Brown et al. recommends strengthening coordination and collaboration in the County government by assigning specific staff to support partnerships between agencies. This recommendation recognizes that improving communication can help organizations share information, reduce duplicate efforts, and make it easier for individuals to move between different services. Instead of having people repeatedly explain their situation to different organizations and people, more coordination could make a smoother process. This would greatly help individuals receive the support they need more quickly and consistently. This idea also connects with the interviews done for this project. Dylan Sweeney explained that limited funding makes it hard to meet the increasing demand for housing and homelessness services. Since resources are limited, it becomes more important for organizations to work together efficiently and utilize those resources effectively. Better coordination cannot completely solve homelessness, but it can help make the system that is already in action more effective by ensuring that available resources are used as efficiently as possible.

Based on the research, interviews, and county reports, Alameda County already does already have many strong programs that help people experiencing homelessness. Emergency shelters, outreach teams, case managers, and nonprofit organizations all play very significant roles in helping people start their recovery process. However, the research consistently showed three major gaps that still prevent many people from achieving long-term stability: affordable housing, long-term case management, and coordination between agencies. One way to improve the current system would be to strengthen communication between organizations. This would be while continuing to increase affordable housing opportunities and long-term case management services. Individuals should be able to keep receiving support even after leaving emergency shelters. This is so they have help finding housing, employment, transportation, healthcare, and other important resources. At the same time, better coordination between agencies can make it much easier for people to access the services they need without delays or confusion. Although homelessness is a complicated issue with no one single solution, Alameda County has already made a strong foundation for helping people in need. By continuing to improve affordable housing, long-term support, and collaboration between organizations, the county can help more people move past

temporary shelter and get to keeping long-term stability. While these changes will not solve the crisis of homelessness overnight, they will be able to make the County's homelessness response system more effective and better prepared to help unhoused people get to long-term stability.

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