

My View

My View: Arizona homelessness crisis needs a coordinated, united action plan

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Encampments of homeless individuals on Madison Street, near some of the nearby shelters in Phoenix (Business Journal file photo).

In cities and towns across Maricopa County and throughout Arizona, unsheltered homelessness is on the rise. With housing development not keeping pace with decades of population growth, flat wages and income slammed by increasing costs of living and rental rates — and a global pandemic — it is no surprise that homelessness is surging.

Our communities have never had enough emergency shelter to meet the full needs of people who lose their housing. The situation today has only intensified the stress on individuals experiencing homelessness and the resource providers and advocates searching for solutions.

People experiencing homelessness with no access to emergency shelter beds need facilitation to an array of services and housing options. Only by pairing targeted and intensive outreach with housing placement will Arizona communities reduce unsheltered homelessness.

While government at every level – state, county and city – is looking at its balance of American Rescue Plan Act funding and their Fiscal Year 2023 budgets, it is imperative that they consider a comprehensive approach to unsheltered homelessness.

Collaborative approach needed

One-size-fits-all solutions are not practical, effective for individuals, or cost effective. The unsheltered population is diverse and requires multiple approaches to give them safe indoor spaces.

The unique circumstances and demographics of Arizona's unsheltered population require multiple interventions that include:

- Safe Outdoor Spaces: Areas where an individual has access to an assigned 12-foot x 12-foot space. Basic amenities such as toilets, hand washing stations, potable water are provided. Security is provided. Maximum 150 to 200 individuals per SOS.
- Transition facility in Maricopa County for Department of Corrections discharges (similar to facility in Tucson).
- Sprung structures for easy access, temporary shelter for up to 100 to 200 individuals per structure. Sprung structures can be available in less than 90 days.
- Bridge housing: Utilizing open motel/hotel rooms for individuals who are employed/ready for employment; waiting on benefits determination; or otherwise have a short-term plan for income to afford permanent housing.
- Medical respite facilities for individuals being discharged from hospitals, long-term care facilitations, rehabilitation facilities.
- Safe haven-like model for individuals with serious mental illness or awaiting a determination of serious mental illness.
- Supported shelter for people with substance abuse issues. A place for short-term stays to detox prior to entering other types of shelter.
- Transition facility for youth ages 18-25 with specialized services for the population based on their unique needs and development.
- Multidisciplinary street outreach teams that work in specific geographic areas with representatives of organizations that specialize in mental health, physical health, veterans, youth, and others; teams to be coordinated to work through specific by-name lists that can guide individuals to one of the above appropriate interventions.

Unsheltered homelessness requires a coordinated, collaborative response that is flexible to the unique needs of the various regions and people of Arizona. Policy and decision makers, influencers and advocates, must work together rather than separately for realistic, sustainable solutions.

Amy Schwabenlender is executive director at Human Services Campus Inc., which operates the 13-acre Human Services Campus where 16 nonprofits provide services to individuals experiencing homelessness.