

Opinion | Too many San Diegans still live on the streets or in shelters. We all need to do more to help.

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Many opportunities and challenges in the ongoing efforts to address homelessness in the city of San Diego will arise in the months and years ahead. The unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic reinforces that the future is unpredictable.

However, the types of innovative, collaborative solutions that already have demonstrated success exemplify the approach upon which future initiatives can be built and expanded. These accomplishments are encouraging signs for the hard work that remains to be done.

The individuals and families experiencing homelessness in the city are diverse in their life experiences and their needs to return to stable, long-term housing. This requires a variety of housing options.

This reality has guided the San Diego Housing Commission's (SDHC) homelessness action plan, Housing First San Diego, since its launch on Nov. 12, 2014.

This plan — developed in consultation with then-City Council President and current Mayor Todd Gloria — has evolved and expanded to provide a spectrum of housing solutions for the continuum of housing needs — from preventing homelessness to partnering with local landlords for rentals to creating permanent housing with supportive services.

Housing First San Diego has provided housing solutions for more than 9,000 households in the last six years that experienced homelessness or were at risk of homelessness. These have occurred through collaborative programs that include the city of San Diego, the county of San Diego, the Downtown San Diego Partnership, homeless service providers, developers, landlords, the philanthropic community and many community organizations.

The program remains an essential part of the city's approach to homelessness and supports the city's Community Action Plan on Homelessness, which the City Council accepted in October 2019. This 10-year plan builds on recent progress, lays out short-term achievable goals and provides a guide for long-term success.

SDHC contracted with the Corporation for Supportive Housing, which has expertise in the area of homelessness, to develop this plan, with input from more than 200 members of the community, including individuals who have experienced homelessness and those who work directly with individuals experiencing homelessness.

The plan's first-year update reported significant progress on its three short-term goals. Based on data from the annual [Point-in-Time Count](#), a census of individuals experiencing homelessness that occurs in January each year, from 2019 to 2020, unsheltered homelessness declined 12 percent overall, veteran unsheltered homelessness declined 44 percent, and youth unsheltered homelessness declined 37 percent. These declines reflect the early efforts to implement recommendations as they were considered throughout 2019 during the development of the plan.

In addition, in Downtown San Diego, the average number of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness each month declined for five consecutive years from 2016 through 2020, according to the Downtown San Diego Partnership's monthly counts. While progress has occurred, challenges remain.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it showed the Community Action Plan on Homelessness' importance to guiding the city as it addresses anticipated issues and unforeseen circumstances.

For example, the city launched Operation Shelter to Home on April 1 with the dual objectives of protecting the health of San Diegans experiencing homelessness during the pandemic and helping them obtain housing as quickly as possible. A key innovation of this initiative was the creation of the Housing Navigation Team, led by SDHC staff.

This team helped individuals along their path to housing at an accelerated rate, problem solving around barriers and case conferencing with multiple partners to expedite the housing process. Operation Shelter to Home helped more than [1,200](#) individuals and [43](#) families obtain permanent or longer-term homes.

More than 360 of these individuals moved into permanent rental apartments of their own with on-site supportive services at two hotel properties SDHC purchased. SDHC obtained good value for the city and its taxpayers through its purchase of these properties, which will remain important affordable housing resources for decades to come. They were extended-stay-type hotels with kitchenettes in each apartment-like unit and full furnishings that were included with the purchases. Minimal work was necessary to make the properties ready for new residents to move in. A Dec. 24, 2020, article in [The San Diego Union-Tribune](#) headlined "Couple finally home for Christmas" showed the positive impact of SDHC's purchase of these properties.

The progress to date is undeniable; however, too many San Diegans still live on the streets or in shelters. Much more work lies ahead. No single agency can resolve the crisis alone, and solutions require time and resources. SDHC will continue our existing programs and work toward additional collaborative innovations to provide a path to permanent homes for San Diegans experiencing homelessness.

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