TransitCenter

Part of the Solution:

Transit's Role in Addressing Homelessness

TransitCenter is a foundation that works to secure a more just and sustainable future with abundant public transportation options. We recognize that our current transportation system is contributing to climate change, that transit systems poorly serve many of their riders, and that access to opportunity in the U.S. is deeply inequitable because of unjust, historical barriers based on race, gender, culture, and identity.

We believe that targeted research and effective grassroots advocacy can persuade leaders to make better choices that center both climate and justice outcomes in transportation. We make grants, conduct research, and coordinate a national network of local advocates to build a successful movement pushing for bold shifts in transportation funding and strategy.

For more information, please visit **www.transitcenter.org.**

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Contents

① Introduction

Transit agencies are at the forefront of the crisis of homelessness in the United States. American leaders and policymakers' inability to address the root causes of homelessness has led to an increased presence of people experiencing homelessness in public spaces, including transit. Riders have reacted to this with fear and frustration. In customer surveys, a significant number of respondents have identified that their agency's handling of homelessness is a top concern and that the presence of homelessness contributes to a relative lack of sense of safety.[1, 2] Agencies are scrambling for a solution, fearing that perceived safety issues will reinforce or exacerbate post-COVID ridership losses.

This tension is playing out amidst an effort to remove people experiencing homelessness from public spaces. Following the 2024 United States Supreme Court ruling Grants Pass vs Johnson, many American cities have embraced punitive responses to the presence of people experiencing homelessness.[3] In San Francisco,[4] Portland[5] and New York,[6] police have forcibly cleared out encampments. The National Alliance to End Homelessness recognizes a concerning nationwide trend toward increasing police response to homelessness and urges communities to rely on trained providers instead.[7]

Despite the reckoning about the harms of over-policing that took place after the murder of George Floyd, it appears that many public officials are turning back to—and even doubling down—on an enforcement system that criminalizes riders for experiencing homelessness.

Agencies should resist the urge to fall back into old habits that rely on a police-first response to homelessness. Rather than simply using police to remove people experiencing homelessness from their systems, agencies must take a more comprehensive approach to addressing the crisis. Compassionate responses that connect people with homeless services yield positive outcomes and put people experiencing homelessness on a path to permanent housing while also saving taxpayers money.[8] Penalizing people experiencing homelessness and forcing them off transit systems hide the problem; they do not solve it. While agencies aren't able to provide people experiencing homelessness with the necessary resources, they should point them in the right direction.

The good news is that some agencies are taking steps to reorient their approaches. In Philadelphia, Denver, Portland, Los Angeles, and Austin, transit agencies have partnered with local agencies and service providers to put riders experiencing homelessness on the path to receiving the care they need. This report will draw on case studies from each of the five cities to demonstrate how agencies can adopt more comprehensive solutions to homelessness within their systems.

Ultimately, transit agencies are not responsible for solving the country's homelessness crisis. Many Americans see homelessness most clearly in public spaces such as parks, libraries, or public transit, but those spaces are not to blame. It is a societal failure to provide housing for all, which leads to the presence of people experiencing homelessness in public spaces. We need a whole-systems approach to ensure all Americans have access to shelter. But transit agencies need not sit idly by while they wait for an upstream fix to the problem. Here, we highlight innovative approaches from agencies across the United States and point to programs and initiatives that have sought to address homelessness on transit with holistic solutions.

2 Context

Homelessness has been on the rise in the United States. In 2023, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated that approximately 653,100 Americans were experiencing homelessness, a 12% increase from 2022.[9] Both the sheltered and unsheltered unhoused populations have risen over this period, impacting Americans of all races and genders.[10]
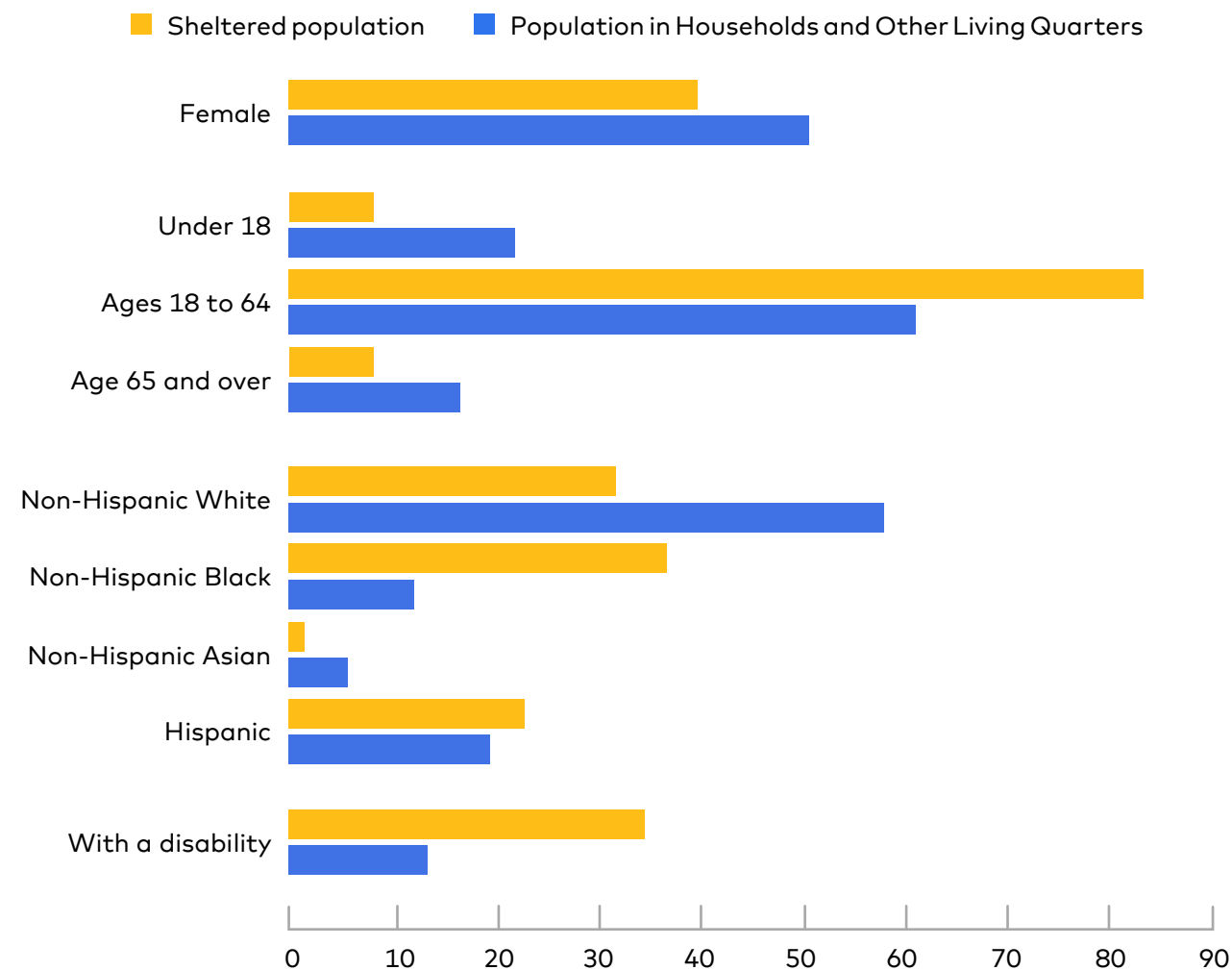
Recent studies and surveys reveal a growing concern among American transit agencies and the public regarding people experiencing homelessness in transit systems.

In a 2020 UCLA poll of transit agencies, more than half of agency respondents reported at least 100 people experiencing homelessness on their systems daily, with even higher numbers on the West Coast.[12] In a 2018 survey, the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) found that 73% of transit agency respondents believed that the presence of people experiencing homelessness impacts ridership negatively.[13] These agencies reported a decrease in "choice" ridership due to hostile interactions and the use of transit facilities as makeshift shelters by people experiencing homelessness, which particularly impacts the rider experience during late night and early morning hours. Another survey of transit agencies reveals that 88% of them have received complaints about homelessness.[14] In addition, annual rider surveys conducted by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) consistently show that the agency gets its lowest marks for addressing homelessness on the system.[15]

Narratives in the media about people experiencing homelessness so often focus on the adverse effects caused by the presence of homelessness rather than the societal failures that have created homelessness and the indignities people experiencing homelessness must endure.[16] A focus on the negative impacts of homelessness can contribute to impressions that people experiencing homelessness are people to be feared rather than fellow humans in need of assistance and support.

The 2023 murder of Jordan Neely on the New York City subway system was a tragic example of how the public perception of the people experiencing homelessness on transit can impact their treatment. A fellow rider killed Mr. Neely, an unhoused subway performer with untreated mental illness, after Mr. Neely had an outburst on the train.[17]

Demographic Characteristics of the Sheltered Population Experiencing Homelessness and the Population in Households and Other Living Quarters: 2018–2022 [11]

Legend:
- Sheltered population
- Population in Households and Other Living Quarters

(Horizontal bar chart, values on x-axis from 0 to 90)

- **Female**: Sheltered ~40; Population ~51
- **Under 18**: Sheltered ~8; Population ~22
- **Ages 18 to 64**: Sheltered ~84; Population ~61
- **Age 65 and over**: Sheltered ~8; Population ~16
- **Non-Hispanic White**: Sheltered ~32; Population ~58
- **Non-Hispanic Black**: Sheltered ~37; Population ~12
- **Non-Hispanic Asian**: Sheltered ~2; Population ~5
- **Hispanic**: Sheltered ~23; Population ~19
- **With a disability**: Sheltered ~35; Population ~13

Note: All comparisons between the sheltered population experiencing homelessness and the population in households and other living quarters by demographic group are different from zero at the 90% confidence level.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates

Across the United States, there has been a wave of new legislation and policies aimed at removing people experiencing homelessness from public spaces.[18] In response to the Grants Pass vs Johnson, many American cities have turned back to enforcement measures in response to the presence of people experiencing homelessness.[19] Examples from San Francisco,[20] Portland,[21] and New York[22] have seen police begin to clear out encampments forcibly. In Florida[23] and Kentucky,[24] state laws ban camping on public and private properties to ensure people experiencing homelessness cannot find a place to stay. In an interview with ProPublica, Jesse Rabinowitz, communications director for the National Homelessness Law Center, described state and local efforts as a "national game of human Whac-A-Mole" as part of an effort to "push people into another town."[25]

It's possible, though uncertain, that we may even see a turn to such policies on transit systems. In March 2024, New York Governor Kathy Hochul deployed the National Guard—usually reserved for disasters—to the MTA subway system in an effort to demonstrate her administration was being "tough on crime."[26]

Public opinion research commissioned by Housing Narrative Lab & National Homelessness Law Center in 2024 demonstrates that a significant majority of the American public believes that jailing and ticketing people for sleeping outside are not viable solutions.[27] In addition, polling conducted in September 2024 by Morning Consult and the National Alliance to End Homelessness found broad bipartisan support for policies that get people housed over sweeps.[28] Public polling has also found that close to three-quarters of people trust the homeless services sector to handle the work of resolving homelessness, polling higher than other entities like law enforcement, the private sector, or elected officials.[29]

Public opinion reflects the views of homelessness policy experts interviewed by TransitCenter staff. These experts conveyed concerns about a turn to punitive measures and urged that transit agencies seek partners at public agencies and nonprofit providers to assist in their responses. Experts interviewed by TransitCenter emphasized that evidence shows robust, sustained funding for affordable housing and supportive services was the more effective solution.

3 How Do Agencies Respond to Homelessness?

A "Homelessness in Transit Environments" report from UCLA provides survey data showing how transit agencies across the United States responded to homelessness in their systems. The survey received responses from 115 agencies.

The UCLA survey found that among the 115 respondents, most agencies did not have a formal policy for responding to homelessness.[31] The UCLA survey found that, despite not having formal policies, most agencies did have actions they would typically take in response. These responses were often an attempt to discourage people experiencing homelessness from using transit. Of the 105 agencies, 70 required riders to exit at the last stop and pay the fare again to board. Fifty-two have used structural elements to discourage sleeping at stops and stations. Fifty-one of the respondents enforced anti-loitering laws on their properties, and 44 conducted sweeps of areas where people experiencing homelessness were known to congregate.

Anti-loitering policies and rules requiring passengers to exit at the last stops are detailed in agency codes of conduct. Agencies create these rules to restrict behaviors that they believe make passengers feel unsafe or uncomfortable. They aim to create an orderly environment and prevent unwanted activities in the system. Agencies use these codes to justify police intervention for minor violations in the system. While police intervention is sometimes warranted, agencies have over-relied upon law enforcement officers to remove people experiencing homelessness, even for minor infractions.

The UCLA survey found that 15% of respondents had altered their response to homelessness in response to protests following the murder of George Floyd. Moreover, 81% did not see police brutality as a challenge to addressing homelessness despite recent cases of police violence. This figure comes in despite continued deaths of people experiencing homelessness in interactions with law enforcement.[32]

Very few agencies in the UCLA survey had internal funding and staffing to address homelessness: 77.5% of respondents did not have a dedicated line item in their budget. Perhaps as a result, 84.5% did not have staff designated to address homelessness. Only two respondents, LA Metro and SEPTA, had six or more staff working

Map of responding agencies to UCLA survey from *Homelessness in Transit Environments Volume 1: Findings from Survey of Public Transit Operators* [30]

Responding Agencies

● 1 agency ② multiple agencies in the same city — state / provincial borders
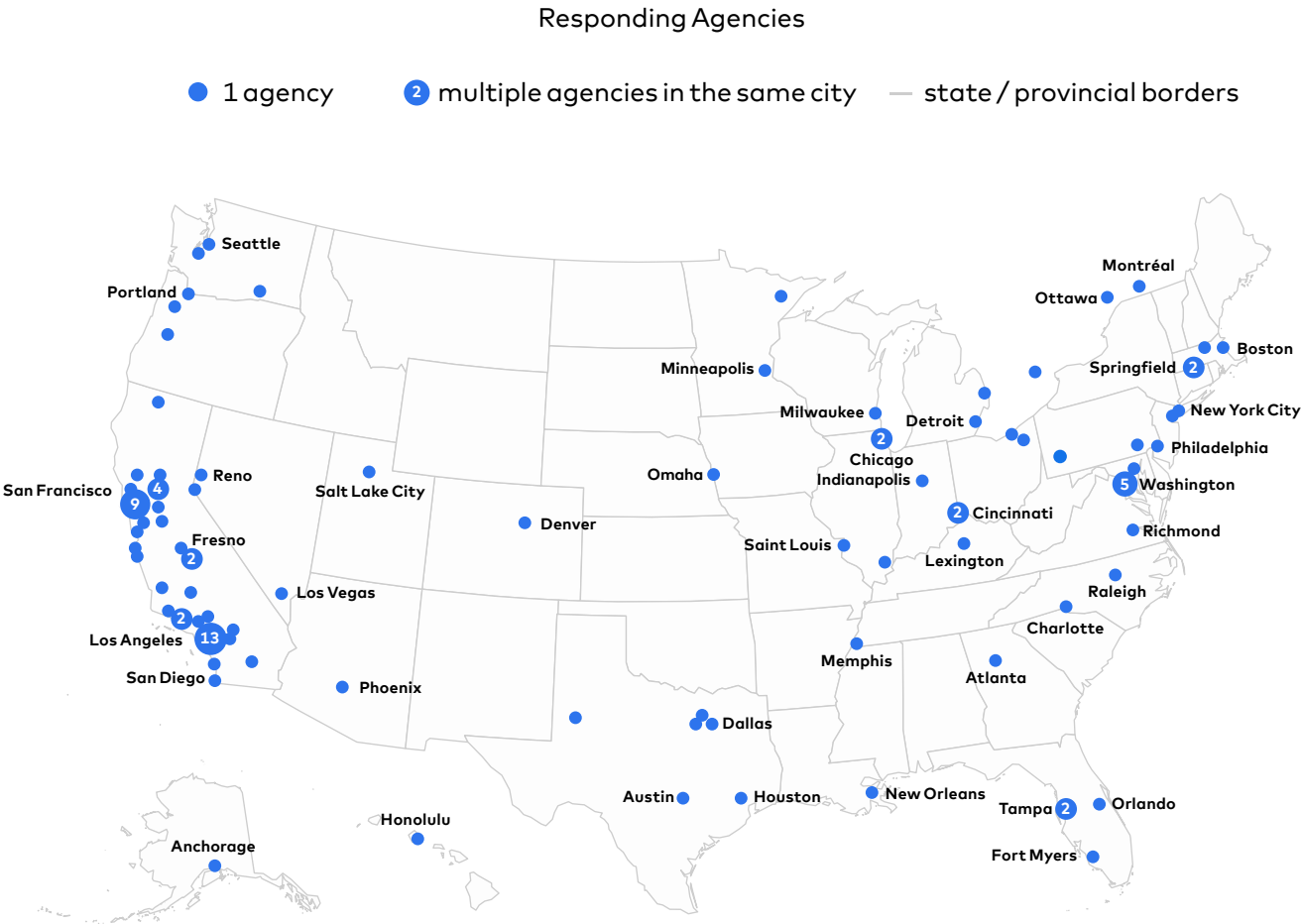
Volume 1: Findings from a Survey of Public Transit Operators

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to address homelessness; 53% of agencies did train either frontline staff or all staff to interact with riders experiencing homelessness.[33]

Most agencies use partnerships to respond to homelessness in their systems. Only 15 of the 104 respondents did not. The most common types of partnerships were those held with law enforcement, homeless shelters, social service nongovernmental organizations, or social service agencies.

Transit Agency Partnerships, by Agency [34]

	Agencies with partnerships	
Types of Partnerships	**# (out of 104)**	**%**
With local law enforcement agencies	72	69.2%
With homeless shelters	49	47.1%
With public social service agencies	60	57.7%
With private or nonprofit social service organizations	53	51%
With public health agencies	39	37.5%
With other transit agencies	16	15.4%
With other local governments	33	31.7%
No partnerships	15	14.4%
Don't know	1	1.0%

Table from *Homelessness in Transit Environments Volume I: Findings from a Survey of Public Transit Operators*

The UCLA survey team notes survey respondents viewed partnerships with service providers as one of the most successful tactics. Twenty-seven of the 48 respondents saw them as moderately successful, and 10 rated them as very successful. The rate of respondents reporting successful partnerships with service providers exceeded that of respondents who saw law enforcement-focused responses such as fare and code of conduct enforcement. 64% were unaware of successful interventions at other agencies to cite as best practices.

The intersection of homelessness and public transit is a complex issue with no one-size-fits-all solution. As transit agencies grapple with balancing service delivery and addressing public safety concerns, the need for comprehensive strategies that ensure housing support and crisis intervention is clear. As demonstrated by the UCLA survey, transit agencies can work within an ecosystem of care providers to find better solutions to homelessness in their systems. The survey also indicates that the entire industry would benefit from additional documentation and sharing of successful strategies to address homelessness.

Self-evaluation of Homelessness Response Strategies, by Individual Respondent [35]

Legend: 🟧 Unsuccessful ⬜ No rating 🟪 Moderately successful 🟦 Very successful

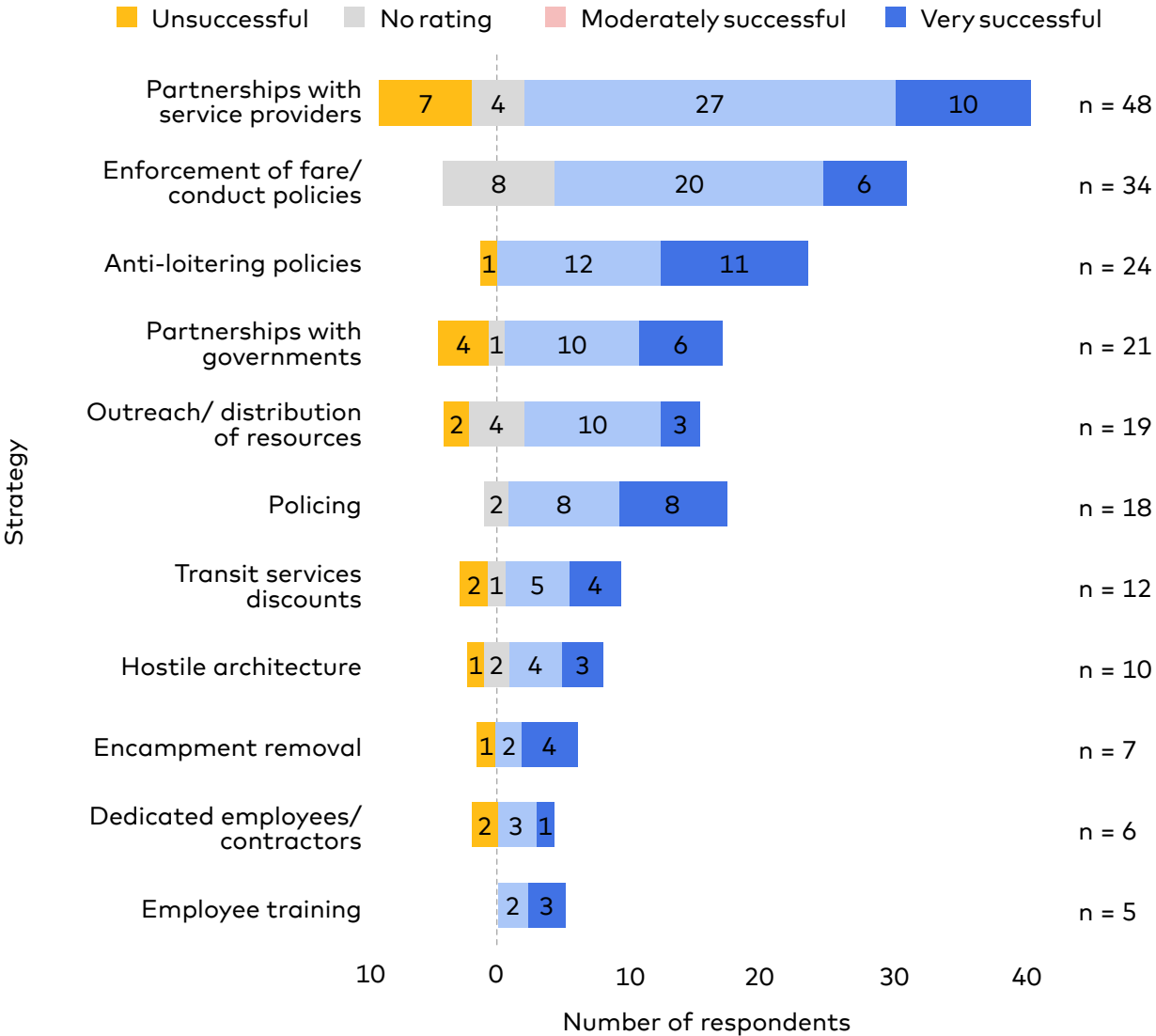| Strategy	Unsuccessful	No rating	Moderately successful	Very successful	
Partnerships with service providers	7	4	27	10	n = 48
Enforcement of fare/conduct policies		8	20	6	n = 34
Anti-loitering policies		1	12	11	n = 24
Partnerships with governments	4	1	10	6	n = 21
Outreach/ distribution of resources	2	4	10	3	n = 19
Policing		2	8	8	n = 18
Transit services discounts	2	1	5	4	n = 12
Hostile architecture	1	2	4	3	n = 10
Encampment removal	1	2		4	n = 7
Dedicated employees/ contractors	2		3	1	n = 6
Employee training			2	3	n = 5

Number of respondents

Table from Homelessness in Transit Environments Volume I: Findings from a Survey of Public Transit Operators

4 Case Studies and Solutions

There is a growing effort among agencies to reform how they address homelessness. Historically, agencies have relied on policing as the primary—and often sole—tool when interacting with people experiencing homelessness. However, in response to the racial reckoning of 2020 and the accompanying recognition that police are not the best solution to every kind of crisis, many transit agencies are exploring alternative approaches. TransitCenter interviewed several transit agencies for this report to learn about those programs. The interviews with transit agency staff broadly recognized that policing alone will not solve homelessness and that addressing homelessness requires partnerships with city agencies and specialists like social workers. As Steve Martingano, acting co-chief of Denver's RTD PD, told us, "Being homeless is not a crime or something we should try to arrest our way out of."

Transit agencies, including SEPTA in Philadelphia and CapMetro in Austin, have reformed their response to homelessness by hiring new internal staff with social service backgrounds and lived experience. These agencies have also forged new partnerships with other public agencies, social service providers, and county departments to chart a more coordinated response to homelessness in their respective regions. Many agencies—including the Regional Transportation District in Denver and TriMet in Portland, Oregon—have also convened an inter-agency peer exchange called the Transit and Vulnerable Populations Workgroup, sharing resources and best practices. The term vulnerable populations in the title is meant to encompass the disparate (and sometimes overlapping) populations that transit staff encounter, including people experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, and/or substance abuse issues.

The following sections further detail these more empathetic and effective responses to the homelessness crisis at transit agencies. Highlighting these reforms is vital because it demonstrates how agencies can iterate with more tools and work more closely with partners to respond more humanely to these crises. It also shows how transit agencies have heeded calls to reallocate scarce resources into these programs.

Many agencies (including the ones detailed below) still rely on police presence and have designed programs that work in a complementary manner with (rather than as a replacement for) police personnel.

Philadelphia

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)

In early 2021, then-SEPTA GM & CEO Leslie S. Richards commissioned a new initiative in response to a marked increase in people experiencing homelessness on SEPTA property following the pandemic. The GM was compelled to find more effective solutions to the growing crisis that SEPTA and peer agencies found themselves in. SEPTA's reformed homelessness response falls under a new initiative the agency launched in 2021: the Safety, Cleaning, Ownership, Partnership and Engagement program (SCOPE). The goal of SCOPE is to connect vulnerable populations to resources and to reduce homelessness in the system overall without police involvement.

Under SCOPE, the SEPTA team manages contracts with outreach firms to deploy social workers throughout the system. These outreach workers work to connect vulnerable people to housing and health services. One of the resources that the team can offer includes temporary shelter in emergency beds that SEPTA has purchased in recent years. If the outreach worker is unable to meet the person's needs in that interaction and/or if the person encountered refuses help at that moment, the outreach worker informs the individual that the system isn't fit for habitation and that they must leave the property.

SEPTA has also more robustly developed its partnership program to coordinate across the region more effectively. When the SEPTA team launched SCOPE, the diagnosis was that access to a lot of support services—from substance abuse centers to temporary shelters—existed in silos. Therefore, SEPTA views partnerships as a way to bridge the gap across pre-existing services in the five counties where the transit agency operates. For example, SEPTA now has access to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and can more closely coordinate with the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services to plug into case management. HMIS is a database that allows SEPTA and its partners to record and collect data on clients over time, including notations on services the person needs, services they've been provided, and housing waiting list information.

Under the SCOPE initiative, SEPTA has also launched a "health navigator" program in partnership with medical and nursing students who attend area schools. This program began when GM Richards put out a call for help to address homelessness on the system. The then-president of Drexel University, John Fry, responded by proposing a program where Drexel medical students could offer basic wound care to people in the system. Based on the success of this program, SEPTA has formed a similar partnership with Cabrini University Health and Exercise Sciences students, who serve as health navigators for vulnerable individuals in a different part of SEPTA's service area.

Austin

Capital Metro (CapMetro)

Capital Metro launched a pilot Community Intervention Specialist (CIS) program in the fall of 2021. Prior to the creation of the program, CapMetro had a "move along" policing approach to homelessness by instructing individuals experiencing homelessness to disperse from transit property. The agency found that this approach didn't work. That individual might leave the bus shelter but would return again. The agency also wanted to be a better community partner working toward longer-term solutions.

The CIS team consists of three staff members, including licensed social workers. The CIS team responds to multiple crises: people experiencing homelessness, people experiencing mental health issues, and people experiencing substance abuse issues. The team does not operate via dispatching. Instead, it receives referrals from CapMetro's transit ambassadors, outreach teams, and the wider public. The CIS team does case management with the referred individual. Their approach is client-led. In other words, the team tries not to be overly prescriptive or overwhelm the person on first contact. The team initially focuses on building trust, which can look like handing out water bottles or hygiene products. From there, the team works with the individual to set goals and name resources or services the client would like to pursue.

The CIS team can be responsive to a wide array of requests, which includes finding housing or obtaining an ID. Once that request is made, the CIS staff member will help the individual fill out a form or accompany them by bus to access that resource.

The CapMetro team has forged several partnerships, including with Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), the continuum of care that manages the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in Austin. The CIS team is trained to do coordinated assessments, which helps provide a single touch point for the individual to access housing or other supportive services across providers within Austin. The CIS team also works with a diversion court—Downtown Austin Community Court—where many clients can go to receive mail. The CIS team also partners with Integral Care to connect people to mental health resources.

In an interview with TransitCenter, one of the specialists said that her team cannot solve homelessness. Nonetheless, she notes that the team can play an essential role as a connector, especially since CapMetro's geographic service area within the Austin area is often more extensive than that of social service organizations.

Denver

Regional Transportation District (RTD)

Acting co-chief of the RTD-PD Steve Martingano realized he had a problem when his department started to get calls from case managers in the region. At the time, the police department enforced the transit system's code of conduct rules by issuing suspensions that barred repeating offenders from transit. Some of these individuals were clients receiving mental health care support and/or people experiencing homelessness. As a result of the issued suspensions, case managers were losing access to their clients, who no longer had reliable transportation to access care; those case workers then called RTD-PD about this issue. To address this, Martingano proposed launching a co-responder pilot program that pairs RTD police officers with mental health clinicians. Together, the co-responder units ride the system and help provide referrals and resources to riders experiencing mental health episodes on the system.

The co-responder team at RTD is in partnership with WellPower—a behavioral and mental health provider in the Denver region. WellPower clinicians in the unit refer riders to therapy and recovery services. Initial contacts with vulnerable riders aim to build trust; the unit can't force anyone to utilize the resources. WellPower also has co-responder units with Denver PD, Denver Parks and Recreation, and other public agencies—ensuring that clinicians are plugged into existing databases and corresponding efforts.[36]

In its pilot iteration, the co-responder model at RTD did well in connecting people to mental health resources and shifting the agency response from a carceral approach. But the agency also found that the program had some limits in its ability to help those facing homelessness and food insecurity—finding that nearly 70% of their contacts were individuals experiencing homelessness.[37] To address this, Denver RTD pursued and won a federal HOPE grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation.[38] These additional resources and subsequent commitments have enabled the agency to hire more contracted staff, including homeless outreach coordinators.[39] For outreach efforts outside of the Denver region but within RTD's larger eight-county service area, RTD-PD contracts with the Jefferson Center for Mental Health for homeless outreach navigators and mental health clinicians.[40]

Portland

Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon (TriMet)

TriMet formed a "Reimagining Public Safety" process and committee after the racial reckoning that took place in 2020.[41] This committee grappled with how to enhance a safety presence without continuing to over-rely on 911 services. Through this process, which included community listening sessions, the committee also wanted to chart a way to incorporate a more holistic approach to safety that connected vulnerable folks to services in the tri-county service area.

Creating the Safety Response Team (SRT) in 2021 was one outcome of the process and committee. The SRT team provides an overall systems presence and conducts social service outreach. Staffers on the team have lived and professional experiences with housing insecurity and homelessness, public health and social services, and mental and behavioral health. Their goal is to provide an enhanced experience to all riders, with particular attention to those experiencing homelessness or exhibiting substance abuse issues. The team provides referrals for housing and mental health services. It connects those riders to the ecosystem of support services across city, county, and state levels, as well as for-profit and nonprofit entities. The SRT team still calls on police, fire, and medical services for emergency backup if the situation requires it.

The team creates a high-visibility presence and welcoming environment on the transit system. Staff start conversations with riders by asking, "How can we serve you today?" Team members carry basic human staples like space blankets, rain ponchos, and toiletries that they distribute to vulnerable riders. The goal of each interaction is to determine if they can address the individual's immediate, short-term, and/or long-term needs. The team does not carry a caseload, but they know how to address an immediate need like medical attention or a longer-term need such as helping folks navigate housing resources.

Like other transit agencies, TriMet staff note that much of what is needed to help is often out of their control—whether it be the lack of available transitional housing units or mental health treatment spaces in the region. Nonetheless, they feel equipped to be connectors to the various existing services. In July 2023, the TriMet Board of Directors approved expanding the Safety Response team—allowing the team to continue to provide referrals for housing and mental health services.[42]

Los Angeles

Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro)

While most of an agency's tools in response to homelessness deal with the effects of the crisis, agencies can take some actions to respond to one of its causes: the lack of affordable housing. Recognizing the need for more housing in Los Angeles County, LA Metro has worked to increase the market rate and provide affordable housing units near its transit stations. LA Metro aims to build 10,000 housing units on agency-owned property through its Joint Development program by 2031. Of those units, 5,000 will be income-restricted affordable housing.[43]

The Joint Development program uses residual agency holdings from past construction projects. The program works with city partners, community stakeholders, and private and nonprofit developers to add new housing near LA Metro stations. While many of these units will be market-rate, some will be set aside for tenants with financial needs, including people experiencing homelessness.

The Lorena Plaza affordable housing development in Boyle Heights broke ground in 2022. LA Metro partnered with a nonprofit developer to create 49 affordable housing units within a quarter mile of an LA Metro rail station. Of the 49 units, 32 will be set aside for people experiencing homelessness. The remaining units will be given to low-income families making at or below 30% and 50% of the area's median income. Half of all units will be rented to veterans who meet the previous criteria.[44,45]

The Joint Development program has a "bench" of qualified developers to work on such projects. Through a competitive Request for Qualifications process, the agency selected 80 private and nonprofit developers with proven records of delivering projects while working with impacted communities. Qualified developers can work on projects such as the Lorena Plaza development. For each site-specific opportunity opened up by LA Metro, qualified developers can submit a proposal for review by the Joint Development team.[46]

As of 2024, LA Metro had more than 5,000 units completed, under construction, or in negotiations to be built. Over 1,000 of these units are affordable housing.[47]

Summary of case studies

Through new initiatives, transit agency staff and their contractors are increasingly playing a role in connecting vulnerable people on their systems to social services providers and resources. While these collaborations have shown positive results, staff members on these teams are clear-eyed about the fact that transit agencies are not in a position to solve the housing crisis in their cities. They also recognize that their day-to-day work only scratches the surface of this population's structural issues, such as rising housing costs, the lack of case managers who can do intensive case management, and the need for more detox centers. The transit agency staff and their contractors can plug folks into the ecosystem of care, but that ecosystem needs more funding, more staff, and more transitional shelter beds and permanent housing units. While most agencies aren't in a position to robustly address structural causes of homelessness, the LA Metro case study illustrates that there are opportunities for agencies to contribute to the pool of available resources.

In their interviews with TransitCenter, the transit agency staff on these teams reiterated they're in the business of moving people, and are committed to serving that primary purpose of mobility while providing everyone with a safe, secure, and comfortable environment. At the same time, the agencies recognize their role as part of the ecosystem to support and connect homeless individuals and other vulnerable populations to resources. Since 2020, transit agencies have increasingly forged partnerships with governmental and nonprofit partners, developed new internal teams that include personnel with lived and professional experience, and reformed internal and external policies and procedures.

5 Recommendations for Transit Agencies

1. Collect data on the pervasiveness of homelessness on your system.

Transit agencies must publicly share the extent to which they are impacted by homelessness and adopt metrics that track how successfully they connect riders experiencing homelessness to the services they need. Agencies should participate in the annual US Department of Housing and Urban Development's "Point in Time" (PIT) Count, which tracks the number of people experiencing homelessness on a given night in January.

SEPTA's SCOPE program is a best practice in this regard. SCOPE collects data and reports on progress across several metrics. These include tracking the number of customer reports of homelessness by station and numbers on the placement of individuals into housing and treatment centers. This data is used to articulate the problem that SEPTA faces clearly. It is accompanied by reports of what SEPTA is doing to solve these issues on its system, clearly stating what help SEPTA needs from other actors, including service providers and government officials.[48]

2. When speaking about the challenges of homelessness, acknowledge the difficulties but don't fearmonger.

While homelessness does create many difficulties for transit staff, agencies should approach the issue with care. If transit officials and staff deliver unsympathetic portrayals of people experiencing homelessness, they can contribute to negative perceptions of people experiencing homelessness. Fearmongering and the demonization of homeless riders can also contribute to a perception that transit is unsafe and discourage ridership. Instead, agencies should acknowledge the genuine challenges of transit being used as a shelter of last resort while proactively implementing programs that connect homeless riders to needed services and calling for bolder interventions to address homelessness at the city, state, and federal levels. Be honest with the public about the challenges faced, but approach the topic with compassion.

3. Build out internal teams to work in partnership with the existing service ecosystem.

Many transit agencies have formed internal teams to conduct outreach to connect riders experiencing homelessness to services. These teams should include staff with lived experience and professional experience dealing with vulnerable populations. Successful interactions often start with a "soft" approach: agencies have found success in building trust by distributing snacks and water to riders at the start of their encounters. Positive, humane interactions as a first step can counterbalance many of the negative past experiences people experiencing homelessness have had navigating bureaucratic systems.

Austin's CapMetro uses a team of social workers to perform case management with people experiencing homelessness on its system. This approach allows them to assess the needs of individual riders and connect them to the services they need. Through partnerships with other Austin agencies and organizations, the team can provide a coordinated response to ensure the individual's needs are met. As transit agencies aren't typically in a position to administer the resources that people experiencing homelessness need—including long-term housing units and counseling services—partnerships are key to ensuring a successful outreach program.

4. Form partnerships with service providers and participate in the ecosystem of care (support services) that already exists in your region.

As a community partner, transit agencies are well-positioned to bridge silos across existing housing, mental health, and substance abuse resources offered by local and state partners, housing authorities, and nonprofits. Agencies should work within the continuum of care in their region to ensure their most vulnerable riders are provided the care they need.

The Denver RTD Police Department partners with a behavioral and mental health provider that can refer vulnerable riders to treatment services and other resources. RTD-PD and several other public agencies in the region work with the same provider, ensuring that the transit agency is part of a coordinated response and can share and learn from what is and isn't working with co-responder units at other agencies.

5. Identify opportunities to provide housing on agency-owned property, especially near transit stations.

Agencies with underutilized properties have a chance to directly address the housing crisis and homelessness by creating housing near their systems. Though most agencies need more expertise to create and maintain housing, they can partner with their communities and developers to build new housing units. New developments provide opportunities to set aside housing for the currently unhoused and families and individuals with low incomes.

LA Metro's Joint Development program shows how agencies can work cooperatively with developers and community stakeholders to provide housing to people experiencing homelessness. Those LA Metro properties are no longer needed for other purposes and are being used to directly address the dire need for more housing in LA County.

Transit agencies should also consider applying "Housing First" principles—a proven approach to addressing homelessness—to their housing developments. Transit agencies could partner with and approve contracts with developers and providers that have a track record of operating within this model. Once developed, these units can be among the resources offered to people experiencing homelessness during coordinated entry processes.

What is Housing First?

Housing First is an approach and philosophy to assist individuals experiencing homelessness. Housing First prioritizes finding permanent, independent housing for the individual, reversing a "treatment first" orientation that views mental health, substance abuse recovery, or any other prerequisites as a precondition to providing someone with independent living.[49] Rather, Housing First places importance on having a safe, stable, and affordable place to live as a necessary first step to achieving other goals.[50] After housing the individual, programs and living centers that apply Housing First principles often offer voluntary, wraparound services like mental health or substance recovery treatment. Harm-reduction approaches broadly inform centers and buildings guided by Housing First principles, but the programs and services can be flexible and often look different in their application.

Housing First is an approach endorsed by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness—a federal agency aiming to end homelessness. Additionally, research and policy organizations, such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness and the Urban Institute, have produced extensive research that bolsters Housing First as a practical policy choice and solution to the homelessness crisis.[51]

6 Conclusion

Transit agencies are not powerless in the fight to end homelessness. They can do more than simply remove people experiencing homelessness from their systems and rely on law enforcement to reduce their presence. Agencies must take steps to call attention to the struggles of their riders experiencing homelessness and work with the relevant agencies to begin a more comprehensive response within transit systems.

Participation in the existing ecosystem of care will be necessary for agencies to successfully reverse the decades of inaction by governments at all levels. While agencies wait for a whole-society response—and indeed, participate in the call for a better response—they can begin working with other agencies and service providers to reform their practices and treat their riders with care and compassion.

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