



Homeless Services Governance: A Comparison of Local Government Coordination and Service Provision Efforts in Four Continua of Care

Corran Bellman, Research Assistant, Homelessness Policy Research Institute

BACKGROUND

In recent years, many cities in the U.S. have witnessed a widespread and growing crisis of homelessness. Cities from Los Angeles to New York City devoted historic amounts of resources to city and county agencies to help understand the magnitude of the crises in order to effectively target and assist vulnerable populations (LA Times, 2021; NYC Comptroller). Other cities with smaller homeless populations like Houston have had success with permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing programs that have provided stable living arrangements for thousands of people experiencing homelessness (Coalition for the Homeless). Across the country, cities have used COVID-19 relief funds in creative ways to direct resources toward housing, services, and prevention through nonprofit organizations and city/county agency partnerships (LA Times, 2021). As the issue of homelessness continues to evolve, housing and services have been provided through various bureaucratic structures; understanding these channels and partnerships is key to reducing homelessness in the long term. Several cities outlined here have well-defined homelessness services bureaucracies: New York, Houston, and Seattle. These case studies offer distinct approaches to homelessness by organizing their bureaucracies in unique ways, with some emphasizing city-county partnerships and others relying on citywide jurisdictions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Continua of Care vary across regions and interact with local governments in unique ways; Seattle/King County employs a collaborative model between the city and county, Houston has a coalition made up of multiple cities and counties, New York City has a single municipal jurisdiction, and Los Angeles incorporates a city-county Joint Powers Authority with a patchwork of support across cities and unincorporated areas within the county.
- Houston, Los Angeles County, New York City, and Seattle have each incorporated new race and equity frameworks into their governance structures through specific initiatives, training, and through greater representation of those with lived experience.
- Jurisdictions need to address homelessness as a long-term problem rather than a temporary crisis in order to create consistent strategies and funding sources that improve long-term housing and service provision outcomes.

COMPARING HOMELESS SERVICES STRUCTURES ACROSS REGIONS

Each region has a unique combination of local governmental jurisdictions and their Continuum of Care (CoC) program, which is mandated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Specifically, a Continuum of Care is a coordinated system of care within a city, county, or broader region that works with individuals and households experiencing homelessness through counts, services, and housing with the intention of reducing and preventing homelessness (LAHSA). According to HUD, there are four necessary parts of a CoC:

1. Outreach, intake, and assessment
2. Emergency shelter
3. Transitional housing with supportive services
4. Permanent supportive housing

New York City

The New York City Coalition on the Continuum of Care (NYC CCoC) is a partnership of various homeless shelter and housing providers, activists, and government agencies that works together to address homelessness in New York, such as the NYC Department of Social Services, NYC Human Resources Administration, NYC Department of Homeless Services, and the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development. Specifically, the housing types supported within the NYC CCOC are permanent supportive housing, rapid rehousing, transitional housing, and joint transitional housing (NYC CCoC). The NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS) is the lead agency responsible for these housing programs and homelessness prevention and services more generally. DHS has relationships with several nonprofit organizations throughout New York City's boroughs, such as the Center for Urban Community Services in Manhattan, Breaking Ground (Brooklyn and Queens), BronxWorks, and Project Hospitality in Staten Island.

Houston

Houston's CoC model emphasizes a collaboration between government and service providers in an effort called The Way Home. The collaborative also centers on partnerships with nonprofit organizations such as Coalition for the Homeless, which acts as the CoC lead agency and the HMIS lead agency for Houston. In contrast with New York City's model, The Way Home reaches beyond the city of Houston into neighboring areas such as Fort Bend County and Montgomery County because of its smaller overall unhoused population (The Way Home). Additionally, city-level coordinating efforts go directly through the city of Houston Mayor's Office for Homeless Initiatives (MOFI). In particular, it coordinates with agencies such as the Housing and Community Development Department and the Health and Human Services Department. Unlike New York City however, MOFI incorporates law enforcement as a key partner and works closely with The Way Home and its main agency, the Coalition for the Homeless (Mayor's Office for Homeless Initiatives). This city-county relationship is a model that Seattle has also adopted.

Seattle

Seattle's CoC includes the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA), which was created in 2019 to address homelessness throughout King County and Seattle with a particular focus on race and equity. Its responsibilities consist of overseeing policy and performance management, Continuum of Care leadership, and the creation of clearly defined success metrics (KCRHA). The KCRHA structure allows for the provision of many direct services, including transitional housing, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing for adults, youth, and families. This is done in coordination with the City of Seattle, whose Homeless Strategy and Investment (HSI) Division within the city's Human Services Department incorporates its own person-centered model that also focuses on racial disparities and prioritizes programs that connect people with the appropriate housing (Seattle Human Services). In some ways, the City of Seattle is more directly involved in the day-to-day priorities of outreach and case management, with emphasis placed on homelessness prevention, emergency housing, and longer-term housing (Seattle Human Services). Seattle and Houston's models in particular, which center on clearly defined city-county partnerships and jurisdictions, contrast with Los Angeles' unique combined city and county CoC, which is led by the Joint Powers Authority LAHSA, the CoC lead agency.

Los Angeles County

The circumstances surrounding LAHSA's formation make Los Angeles a unique case study in looking at how its CoC operates. Following a lawsuit over distribution of General Relief funds under Section 17000 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, LAHSA was created in 1993 as a city/county joint powers authority and was designed to manage homeless services programs (UCLA, 2021). It covers the entirety of Los Angeles County, with the exception of Pasadena, Glendale, and Long Beach, and is separated into eight service planning areas (SPA), facilitating housing placements and coordinating services similar to those in Seattle. In contrast to previous examples, Los Angeles County's CoC has significant jurisdictional fragmentation and ambiguity because of numerous cities and groups with conflicting housing authority, such as the City of Santa Monica. Over time, LAHSA's coordinated entry system (CES) which aims to ensure that resource allocation is efficient and equitable has also evolved to connect people to housing, but this has come with jurisdictional tension regarding how, and where, it operates (LAHSA). Similar to New York City, Los Angeles-based nonprofit organizations have regional operations – LA Family Housing offers most services in the San Fernando Valley (SPA 2), HOPICS (Homeless Outreach Program Integrated Care System) focuses on services and housing placements in South LA (SPA 6), and Skid Row Housing Trust manages many PSH complexes in the downtown area (SPA 4).

RACE EQUITY EFFORTS & GOVERNING STRUCTURES

As cities and counties have increasingly acknowledged the role of structural racism as an important root cause of homelessness, cities and counties have established commissions, initiatives, and offices dedicated to addressing racial equity in homelessness. New York City’s Racial Justice Commission was established in 2021 and focuses on a number of areas that ultimately impact the disproportionate incidence of homelessness among people of color in New York, such as public safety, affordable housing, and education (NYC Racial Justice Commission). Likewise, Seattle and King County each have their own race and equity initiatives. Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) targets many of the same policy areas and offers direct racial equity support through training, technical assistance, and community engagement to address existing community inequities, some of which contribute to disparities in homelessness (Seattle RSJI). King County’s Strategic Plan for Equity and Social Justice centers on access to opportunity in economic development, housing, health, and the justice system, with particular emphasis on BIPOC communities (King County Equity and Social Justice). King County also has a large American Indian and Alaska Native population, and Native-led nonprofit organizations like Chief Seattle Club offer culturally-informed health care, supportive services, and housing to Indigenous people of the region (Chief Seattle Club).

Each continuum of care has a similar set of measures to place greater emphasis on racial equity principles. New York City’s homelessness response has evolved to incorporate elements of race and equity as well as those who have lived experience with homelessness. Within the last 10 years, the city has undertaken several efforts that offer a starting point to correct for long standing inequities that have resulted in higher rates of poverty and incarceration among BIPOC residents. First, there have been a series of efforts to invest in strengthening communities that experience homelessness at higher rates — often communities of color — to prevent incidences of homelessness in the first place. Some of these racial equity-minded measures include rental supplement programs, grants for single adults and families, and emergency financial assistance (Department of Homeless Services). Additional efforts include expanding shelter services and developing stable permanent housing in disproportionately affected communities of color.

Seattle and Houston have similar approaches in that they have focused more on structural change within their respective continua of care. For example, KCRHA leads training sessions and activities on race, equity, and cultural relevance in an effort to engage in a full “organizational transformation.” They also actively seek partnerships with organizations and stakeholders that specialize in systems that are homelessness-adjacent and intersect in areas, such as affordable housing (KCRHA). Houston’s The Way Home Continuum of Care is similar and relies on five strategies to address racial equity and social justice, including examining certain homeless response system procedures and encouraging hiring and retention practices that diversify staff makeup at all levels (The Way Home).

One of LAHSA's key efforts to improve racial equity in the homelessness services realm involved the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness in 2018 (LAHSA). There is a well documented history of the LA County homeless population containing a disproportionate number of Black people, and this committee was established to address this disparity in several ways. These included looking at contributing factors to the overrepresentation of Black people among PEH, finding opportunities to increase racial equity, and recommending preventative measures for Black people at risk of homelessness. Alongside these efforts, the LAHSA Racial Equity Initiative included the creation of the LAHSA Equity Committee, whose goal is to undertake organizational change within LAHSA through new DEI processes, policies, and resource allocation (LAHSA). The shift in organizational culture was facilitated through racial equity training, employee resource groups, equity dialogue series, and equity based decision-making frameworks, and mirrors structural endeavors pursued in Seattle by the KCRHA.

Finally, Los Angeles County's Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiative (ARDI) was established in 2020 and was set up to promote and guide its efforts to combat racism in all forms, which affects Black residents in a variety of ways that disproportionately result in homelessness. Some of these strategic plans include establishing target goals to help measure progress, identifying representative outcomes specific to various communities, and developing implementation plans for new and existing initiatives, in hopes of utilizing their resources to secure more equitable outcomes (Chief Executive Office of Los Angeles County).

LIVED EXPERIENCE GOVERNANCE

A recurring theme in each Continuum of Care is the greater representation of those with lived experience of homelessness, as more entities acknowledge institutional disadvantages certain groups face. While consulting residents with lived expertise has been encouraged across the country by HUD, efforts to amplify these voices have been especially pronounced in New York City and Los Angeles. In the New York City Continuum of Care, the Persons with Lived Experience Committee was designed to serve as the bridge between the NYC CoC and PEH or those who are formerly homeless by facilitating active participation in the Steering Committee's decision-making process (New York City CoC). This has allowed for greater input on crucial projects and services offered by the NYC CoC. New York City has also included the Youth Action Board as a Standing Committee of the New York City CoC (New York City CoC). Similarly, LAHSA's Lived Experience Advisory Board consists of 15 members with unique experiences of homelessness, each of whom advocate for and represent LAHSA service planning areas (LAHSA). The Homeless Youth Forum of Los Angeles also aims to end youth homelessness, by engaging eight board members with lived experience on strategies for policymaking and program implementation (LAHSA).

Contrasting with New York City and Los Angeles, Seattle incorporates lived experience into existing KCRHA and City of Seattle governing bodies. While it does not specifically convene a body of individuals with lived experience, there are several such members that sit on KCRHA's governing committee (KCRHA). Seattle and King County have resources dedicated to youth development generally, but specific

attempts to address youth homelessness in the area are less clearly defined. KCRHA's partnership with the Washington State Lived Experience Coalition (LEC) displays its focus on trauma-informed practices, racial equity, and social justice principles as key components in its goal of ending homelessness (Lived Experience Coalition).

Houston's efforts are more understated, perhaps reflective of its smaller homeless population. The Way Home has not established a special committee or board that is dedicated to centering the voices of people with lived experience, but engagement with people who have lived experience of homelessness is mentioned in their person-centered approach framework and as a core element of their engagement strategy for assisting unsheltered individuals and families (The Way Home). However, in 2021 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded \$10 million to The Way Home CoC for the Youth Homeless Demonstration Program (YHDP), which was launched as an initiative to end youth homelessness and amplify youth voices and representation (The Way Home).

LOOKING FORWARD

As homelessness persists, and even worsens in many urban areas across the country, there have been many renewed questions about better ways to organize homeless systems governance. This is especially true for Los Angeles County, which is already one of the most complex jurisdictions because of its large city populations, vast geographical area, and the number of unincorporated and incorporated cities. Home for Good is a policy initiative that was created by United Way of Greater LA in response to uncoordinated, largely unsuccessful efforts to prevent homelessness and offer supportive services for those experiencing homelessness. The initiative uses a collective impact model, emphasizing collaboration across sectors and data-driven, evidence-based approaches with records of success (United Way). The assumption Home for Good relies on is that even if LAHSA improves its effectiveness as a services delivery system of services, it will still be essential to coordinate with other organizations on issues related to homelessness that fall outside of LAHSA's operating scope.

Home for Good has proposed several governance model attributes that should be included in strategies to address homelessness: 1) more coordinated, more consistent, and more clear goals, 2) easier contracting and service delivery for providers, and 3) efficient distribution of scarce resources (United Way).

Going forward, cities should address homelessness as a long-term problem that requires creative, collaborative, and equitable solutions, rather than treating it like any other temporary crisis. Seattle's RSJI and Los Angeles' ARDI initiative acknowledge the institutional barriers that disproportionately impact people of color and other strategies should continue pursuing longer term solutions that prioritize homelessness prevention. The recommendation put forward by Home for Good to take a collective action approach and focus on community-based solutions can also ease the burden on single agencies like DHS or LAHSA.

FIGURE 1: COMPARISON OF FOUR HOMELESS SERVICE STRUCTURES: HOUSTON, LOS ANGELES COUNTY, NEW YORK CITY, AND SEATTLE

CITY/COUNTY	HOUSTON	LOS ANGELES COUNTY	NEW YORK CITY	SEATTLE
Continuum of Care — City/County agency	Mayor’s Office for Homeless Initiatives	Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) Los Angeles County Homeless Initiative	Department of Homeless Services (DHS)	County: King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) City: Human Services Department
Select Nonprofit organizations / partner organizations / agency divisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Way Home ■ The Coalition for the Homeless ■ Other organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ LA Family Housing (San Fernando Valley) ■ PATH (People Assisting the Homeless) ■ SSG/HOPICS — Special Service Groups Homeless Outreach Program Integrated Care System (South LA) ■ Skid Row Housing Trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Center for Urban Community Services (Manhattan) ■ Goddard Riverside (Manhattan) ■ Breaking Ground (Brooklyn/Queens) ■ BronxWorks (The Bronx) ■ Project Hospitality (Staten Island) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Homeless Strategy and Investment Division (HSI) ■ Homelessness Outreach and Provider Ecosystem (HOPE)
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Chemical dependency services ■ Drop-in centers ■ Mental health services ■ Shelters ■ Street outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Prevention ■ Emergency: Shelter, transitional housing, day centers, hygiene ■ Housing: Diversion (one-time funds and services), rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Street outreach ■ Transitional housing ■ Medication monitoring ■ Case management ■ Substance use counseling ■ Mental health care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Prevention ■ Emergency: Shelter, transitional housing, day centers, hygiene, permitted villages ■ Housing: Diversion (one-time funds and services), rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing

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ABOUT THE HOMELESSNESS POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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OUR VALUES

Infuse **equity and cultural humility** into all aspects of HPRI research, conversations and convenings. Uplift **collaboration** both between researchers from different backgrounds and institutions and from the research community to the policy and practice communities.

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hpri@usc.edu



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