

AUSTIN'S HOMELESS STRATEGY DIVISION

OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT – DECEMBER 2023

David Gray
Homeless Strategy Officer
December 13, 2023



HOMELESS STRATEGY DIVISION ASSESSMENT

BACKGROUND

June 2023 Memo from Interim City Manager

- ICM Jesús Garza initiated special assignment to evaluate the organizational structure for homeless services spanning many City departments.
- Special assignment included two key goals:
 1. Focus full-time on the broad spectrum of programs, policies, and funding the City utilizes to address this issue.
 2. Arrive at overarching strategies that cohesively advance the City's work.

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RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT

Evaluated citywide programs, policies, and practices from June 2023-Oct. 2023.

- Conducted a literature review of previous reports on homelessness in Austin.
- Attended site visits and meetings with City of Austin departments.
- Reviewed City of Austin departments' operational policies and procedures.
- Joined and convened cross-departmental meetings regarding public space management, emergency preparedness, and outreach/engagement.
- Participated in direct-service programs and initiatives (e.g., HEAL).
- Researched other municipalities' homelessness strategies and delivery models (e.g., Houston, Dallas, Denver, Nashville, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Francisco).
- Conducted site visits to witness municipal operations and homeless shelters, day centers, and housing facilities in San Antonio, Phoenix, and Philadelphia.

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RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT

City of Austin Departments Sharing Responsibilities for Homelessness Response

Animal Services	Austin Convention Center Dept.
Austin Code & Development Services Dept.	Austin Fire Dept.
Austin Energy	Austin Public Health Dept.
Austin Police Dept.	Austin Resource Recovery
Austin Public Library	Austin Water
Austin-Travis County EMS	City Manager's Office
Aviation Dept.	Communications and Public Information Office
Downtown Austin Community Court	Economic Development Dept.
Financial Services Dept.	Homeland Security and Emergency Management
Housing Dept.	Intergovernmental Relations
Parks and Recreation Dept.	Planning Dept.
Transportation and Public Works Dept.	Watershed Protection Dept.

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Contract Management

- Currently: There are more than 100 contracts related to homelessness worth tens of millions of dollars. Contracts are managed by different departments, frequently without cross-departmental coordination and collaboration.
- Need: Consolidate contract strategy development, management, and monitoring under one team focusing exclusively on homelessness.
- Outcome: Improved contract oversight yielding better outcomes for clients.

Proactive Communications

- Currently: Very sparse proactive communications. Messaging comes from multiple sources and is not always coordinated across departments.
- Need: A coordinated and consistent stream of messages about the City's approach to addressing homelessness.
- Outcome: Improved clarity that builds trust and changes public opinions.

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Public Space Management

- Currently: Departments do not always collaborate on outreach, cleanup, and closure actions. Also, cleanups are lengthy due to contractors operating with staff spread across multiple sites managed by different departments.
- Need: A centralized structure for prioritizing encampment outreach, cleanup, and closure actions, addressing camps of various sizes on public property.
- Outcome: More rapid and noticeable cleanups of encampments on public land.

Government Relations

- Currently: No designated single point-of-contact to manage relationships with other government entities, including state and federal funders for local programs.
- Need: Create a new position within the homelessness team focused exclusively on intergovernmental relations.
- Outcome: Improved coordination between City and other governmental entities and reduced adverse effects of changes in local, state, and/or federal policies.

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ESTABLISHING A HOMELESS STRATEGY OFFICE

Office Justification

- The City established the Homeless Strategy Division within APH in Dec. 2019.
- This structure no longer reflected homelessness as a priority for the City.
- On November 21, 2023, the Interim City Manager announced the creation of a stand-alone Homeless Strategy Office.
- Key responsibilities for the HSO include:
 - Manage contracts between the City and third-party vendors.
 - Supervise operations at City-owned homeless shelters.
 - Assist with expanding housing availability across the continuum of need.
 - Coordinate public space management (outreach, clean-up, and closures).
 - Lead communications regarding the City's efforts to end homelessness.
 - Serve as the point-of-contact for other agencies and organizations.
 - Uphold best practices with Austin-Travis County's Homeless Response System partners.
 - Engage with the local business and philanthropic community.

HOMELESS STRATEGY DIVISION ASSESSMENT

ENHANCING OUR IMPACT

Enhancing Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	Outcomes
Procurement and management of homeless-related contracts within HSD.	More agile resource deployment, and enhanced tracking of homeless spending.
Timely identification and delivery of housing units across a continuum of types.	More emergency shelter, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing in ATX.
Coordinated prioritization and scheduling of public space management resources.	Rapid and noticeable cleaning of public spaces (e.g., parks, roadways, waterways).
Research and data-driven appeals for partners to expand service offerings.	More robust aid for PEH with mental health and substance use disorders.
Proactive communications and public education campaigns.	Increased public awareness and support for City's homelessness efforts.
Secure financial support for initiatives from private and philanthropic entities.	Broadened donor base that provides sustainable non-City funding sources.

NEXT STEPS

PHASING-IN A HOMELESS STRATEGY OFFICE (HSO)

Phase 1

- Complete staff transfers and fill all vacant positions.
- Finalize internal review of homeless contracts and spending.
- Finalize communications and engagement plan.

Phase 2

- Complete transfers of work portfolios to HSO (e.g., contract management, public space management, etc.).

Phase 3

- Provide inaugural HSO budget to CMO for FY25 City budget process.

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