



The Sweeps Aren't Working: A Policy Proposal to End Displacement and Support Sanctuary Communities in Oakland

Policy Analysis Conducted for the Wood Street Commons

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The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California at Berkeley. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgements and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Goldman School of Public Policy, by the University of California or by any other agency.

Executive Summary

Oakland's current approach to visible homelessness—forced encampment closures or “sweeps”—is costly, dangerous and entrenches unsheltered homelessness in a traumatizing cycle. Despite a dramatic increase in sweeps since 2020, the number of unsheltered residents has continued to grow. Sweeps do not end homelessness. Instead, they destabilize vulnerable people, sever connections to care, destroy essential property, and increase health risks—including mortality. These policies disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, elderly, disabled, and LGBTQ+ residents, reinforcing historic patterns of racial and economic exclusion.

This report draws on over 50 interviews with unhoused residents, service providers, and policymakers, as well as field observations, audits, policy documents, academic literature and case studies. It finds that there is a serious disconnect between public and policymakers' perception and the realities on the ground for unsheltered people. Shelters offered during closures are frequently unavailable, inaccessible, or unsafe, and the EMT's own reports show there are not enough beds for even a fraction of those displaced.

Sweeps force people to relocate to surrounding areas, often multiple times. Repeated displacement leads to loss of housing documents, medications, mobility aids, and relationships with providers. The result is worsened physical and mental health, interrupted access to services and housing processes, increased emergency room use, and rising public costs.

Oakland needs a new approach; one that recognizes the knowledge, resilience, and organizing power of unsheltered residents. This report proposes a three-part policy shift:

1. **End Involuntary Displacement:** Impose an immediate moratorium on sweeps while more appropriate, compassionate and effective interventions are determined.
2. **Partner with Unhoused Communities:** Involve unhoused and formerly unhoused residents and their advocates in designing policies and programs.
3. **Pilot Sanctuary Communities:** Establish safe, service-enriched, self-governed sites on public land where unsheltered people can live with stability, dignity, and support.

The report includes a pilot plan developed by Wood Street Commons in appendix B, with cost estimates (~\$72,000 for year one), governance models, funding sources, and potential locations detailed in the report. Sanctuary Communities are a proven, realistic, community-based alternative to sweeps. By reallocating funds currently spent on forced evictions, Oakland can reduce harm, build trust, and move toward real solutions in partnership with unsheltered people.

Table of Contents

Methodology.....	1
Introduction.....	2
The Encampment Management Policy (EMP).....	3
Centering Racial Equity.....	5
The Sweeps Aren't Working	
Encampment Closures Do Not Eliminate Encampments.....	7
Encampment Management Lacks Accountability and Transparency...	10
Shelters are Unavailable, Inadequate or Inaccessible.....	13
Sweeps Make Homelessness Worse and More Dangerous	
Sweeps Particularly Harm Elders and People with Disabilities.....	16
Sweeps Sever Connections to Care Providers.....	17
Sweeps Cause Loss of Property Needed for Housing and Survival....	18
Sweeps Increase Mortality of Unsheltered People.....	19
Curbside Communities Help People Survive.....	20
Financial Cost.....	22
Beyond Involuntary Displacement:	
Supporting the Safety and Well-Being of Unsheltered Oaklanders	
Sanctuary Communities.....	23
Community Engagement.....	24
Internal Governance.....	25
Security and Fire Safety.....	26
Additional Costs: Infrastructure and Services.....	26
Funding Options.....	28
Locations.....	29
Next Steps.....	32
Appendices	
Appendix A - Key Takeaways.....	33
Appendix B - WSC Pilot Program Proposal.....	36
Appendix C - Case Studies: Pu' uhonu O Wai'anae (POW).....	40
Seattle Housing And Resource Effort (SHARE).....	46

Methodology

This report draws from a mixed-methods research approach, including interviews, field observation, case study analysis, academic literature and policy document review. The report is grounded in 52 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with currently and formerly unsheltered individuals, service providers, medical professionals, housing advocates, legal experts, city and county staff, and organizers working directly with unsheltered communities. Interviews were used to assess Oakland's current policies and implementation practices around encampment closures.

- Interviewed County staff from Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless, Alameda County Housing and Homelessness Services, Continuum of Care Leadership Board, Lifelong Medical Services
- Interviewed City staff from the Department of Public Works, City Administrator's office, Oakland Police Department
- Interviewed leadership and staff at Wood Street Commons, POOR Magazine, Urban Compassion Project, The Village in Oakland, Love and Justice In the Streets, Oakland Sweeps Support, Town Business
- Interviewed staff and leadership from local organizations Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC), Pyatok Architecture + Urban Design, Western Regional Advocacy Project
- Interviewed journalists and academics from The Oaklandside, Street Spirit, UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare
- Interviewed staff and leadership from Tiny Home communities in San Francisco, Contra Costa and Alameda County: Earth Wave Collective, Safe Organized Spaces (SOS), Tree Ring Village, Tiny Homes Logic, Tiny Village Spirit

Direct Observation

The author conducted field observation and interviews at unsheltered communities before and during encampment closures across Oakland between February and April 2025. Observations included documentation of the presence or absence of shelter offers, property handling, compliance with city policy, and post-sweep conditions. These findings were supplemented by ongoing reports from frontline organizers who regularly support residents during sweeps.

Policy and Document Review

The report includes a review of City of Oakland Encampment Management Team (EMT) operational data, city council reports, state grant applications (e.g., HHAP and ERF), internal city audits, Point-in-Time homelessness counts, EMT Updates related reports and academic literature.

Case Studies and Best Practices

To inform alternatives, the report incorporates best practice research through case studies of successful self-governed communities including SHARE/WHEEL in Seattle and Pu'uhonua O Wai'anae in O'ahu. Case study material includes interviews with organizers, residents, and partnering organizations as well as publicly available reports and internal documentation.

Introduction

There are 5,490 people living without permanent housing in Oakland, according to the 2024 Point in Time count of unhoused people.¹ Roughly 3,678 are unsheltered, which means that they sleep in a car, a tent, on the street or in some other form of makeshift shelter. As the population of unhoused Oaklanders grows, so too do their curbside communities, what the City refers to as “encampments.”²

Oakland’s current policy is to “manage” these communities with a heavy reliance on “encampment closures”³ or sweeps.⁴ During a sweep, city officials, police and sanitation workers forcibly evict unsheltered people living in a public space and dispose of any remaining property. Despite protest from the impacted community as well as significant research and expertise warning against the danger and counterproductive impact of sweeps, cities throughout California increasingly use them to respond to visible homelessness.

There are several objectives behind Oakland’s employment of sweeps. Encampment closures are meant to enhance public health and safety, protect critical infrastructure, provide access to shelter and services and reduce the number of encampments and people living in unsheltered homelessness.⁵ The problem is that sweeps in Oakland are incredibly costly, dangerous and undermine many of the encampment closure’s objectives. There are better paths to accomplishing those objectives.

This report proposes a pivot in Oakland’s policy away from the displacement of unsheltered communities and toward partnership with unhoused residents to create real solutions that protect the health and safety of all Oaklanders and their City. Long-form interviews with impacted community members,⁶ City and County employees, case studies, empirical evidence and published research are the foundation of this three-part policy proposal:

1. **Cease Forcible Displacement of Unhoused People (“Stop the Sweeps”)** – Until sufficient shelter and housing exist, Oakland should impose an immediate moratorium on involuntary evictions of encampments.

¹ [Data | Homelessness Solutions | Alameda County](#)

² While Oakland still has no official definition of “encampment,” it is typically understood to mean a settlement of 1 or more people living outside in tents or makeshift shelter. This report will use the terms “curbside community” or “unsheltered community” whenever possible as “encampment” is a dehumanizing term historically synonymous with property blight.

³ The City defines an encampment closure as a “complete clearing of the total area without option to return.” [City of Oakland | Homelessness and Encampment Response](#).

⁴ Sweeps is the term used most often in this report and used most commonly among unsheltered people. It calls to attention that sweeping unsheltered communities is a policy rooted in treating people as “blight.” Unfortunately, that is a perspective still prevalent today.

⁵ [Encampment Executive Order, March 14, 2024 Encampment Assistance Agreements With Caltrans](#)

⁶ “Impacted community members” refers to people who have experienced sweeps and people who provide support during sweeps and ongoing support to unsheltered communities, many of whom are formerly unsheltered themselves.

2. **Co-Create Solutions with Impacted People** – Oakland has a wealth of currently and formerly unhoused residents with proven on-the-ground organizing experience creating shelter, services, safety, programs and councils with few resources or support. Unhoused organizers, advocates and professionals have been building together throughout Oakland’s saga of sweeps and resistance.⁷ Oakland needs to engage seriously with this expertise to stop the harm and waste of current, ineffective policies and find real solutions.

3. **Pilot “Sanctuary Communities” – Safe, Self-Governed Villages** – As a key example of co-created solutions, Oakland should establish Sanctuary Communities: resident-led, self-governed, service-enriched settlements on designated sites (with basic infrastructure like sanitation and water provided). Sanctuary Communities offer unsheltered people the stability, safety, and security needed to maintain the arduous journey to permanent housing. Case studies and lessons from Oakland’s own experience show that such communities can produce the results current policy aims for: public health and safety, infrastructure protection, resource provision and a reduction in unsheltered homelessness overall.

The following sections will outline Oakland’s Encampment Management Policy (EMP) and the problems with its overreliance on sweeps: how they disproportionately impact the most vulnerable and historically targeted populations, why they don’t work, what is happening on the ground, how this puts unsheltered people in danger and undermines their ability to get housed, and finally, the cost. The report concludes with an exploration of Sanctuary Communities: what they are, why they work and an implementation roadmap for Sanctuary Communities in Oakland.

The Encampment Management Policy (EMP)

The Oakland Encampment Management Policy (EMP), last updated in 2022⁸, is the city’s official framework for addressing the crisis of unsheltered homelessness.⁹ The policy divides public spaces into “high-sensitivity” zones, where encampments are prioritized for closure, and “low-sensitivity” zones where they are not. It also names a multi-departmental Encampment Management Team (EMT) responsible for carrying out operations that includes public health workers and police officers. The policy mandates that before any encampment closure, the city must offer alternative shelter or housing, except in instances of emergency.

The EMP was passed in 2020 amid great controversy. Public comment went on for 5 hours taken up mostly by community members, lawyers, and advocates protesting the EMP. They demanded the city rework the policy with help from the newly formed [Homeless Advisory](#)

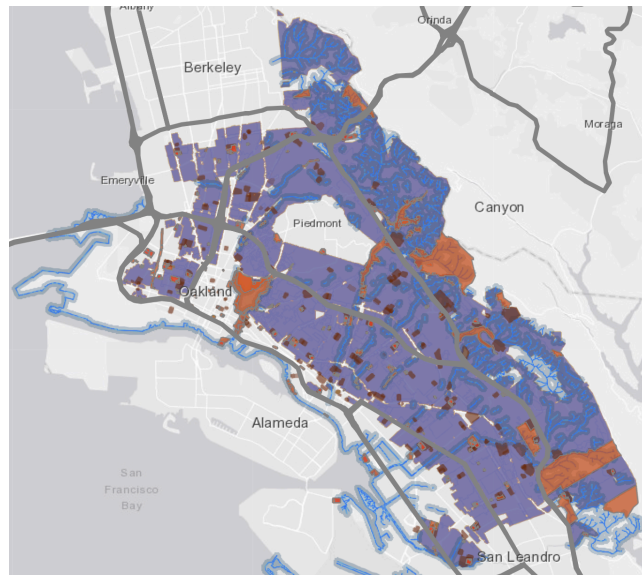
⁷ [Love and Justice in the Streets](#), [POORmagazine.org](#), [Wood Street Commons](#), [Our Community — The Village in Oakland](#), [Partnerships & Alliances - The Sogorea Te Land Trust](#), [Where Do We Go?](#)

⁸ On August 9, 2022 City Council approved the Miralle Settlement Agreement that added new requirements to the EMP regarding property storage, prior notification and consideration of weather conditions during any encampment operation.

⁹ [Encampment Management Policy](#)

[Commission](#),¹⁰ or scrap it altogether.¹¹ Supporters of the policy cited health and fire risks from unsheltered communities near their homes as significant concerns. Overwhelmingly, there was great concern that the policy furthered the criminalization of homelessness due to its widespread restrictions on where unsheltered people could settle. Over 90% of the City is off-limits, or “high-sensitivity” shown in the shaded areas of the sensitivity zones in Figure 1 below. When the policy was passed, Oakland had roughly 150 settlements of unsheltered people; today, there are upwards of 1,486, and 1,340 of them are in designated “high-sensitivity” zones.¹²

Figure 1. Map of Oakland’s “High-sensitivity” Zones



All shaded zones are “high-sensitivity.”

Source: Mapping Homeless Encampments & Associated Services.¹³

The focus of this report is not the EMP in its entirety. Specifically, this report will look at the practice of encampment closures, commonly referred to as “sweeps.”¹⁴ This policy most often leads to unsheltered people being displaced without shelter. While some people may be offered shelter during a sweep, there is only enough for a small fraction of unhoused Oaklanders, a fact attested to over and over in reports to City Council.¹⁵ Oakland is in the midst

¹⁰ The Homeless Advisory Commission was created to make recommendations on how the City should spend revenue earmarked for homelessness services from the vacant parcel tax. The Commission includes people with lived experience of homelessness, experience providing services and from communities with high populations of unhoused people.

¹¹ [Oakland has a new homeless camp policy, despite protests](#)

¹² [Encampment Management Policy Update](#) pg. 7

¹³ [Mapping Homeless Encampments & Associated Services](#)

¹⁴ “Sweeps” are defined here as the forcible displacement of unsheltered people and clearing the land of their property and other material around them. In Oakland this is an operation carried out by the Encampment Management Team (EMT).

¹⁵ [March 14, 2024 Encampment Assistance Agreements With Caltrans](#) page 1

of an ongoing shelter crisis, first declared in 2017.¹⁶ Since then, sweeps have only become more frequent.

Like many other cities in California, Oakland has increased the frequency of sweeps since the *Grants Pass*¹⁷ Supreme Court decision eliminated a requirement that shelter be made available to anyone displaced during a sweep. In June of 2024 the Supreme Court overturned a Ninth Circuit decision, *Martin v. Boise*, which held that displacing unhoused individuals without providing indoor shelter is cruel and unusual punishment. Three months later Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao issued an Executive Order demanding “full execution of the EMP,” stating that in no case, will emergency or urgent closures be delayed for shelter unavailability.” Since Thao’s Executive Order, the frequency of encampment closures has skyrocketed; shelter availability has not.

Centering Racial Equity

Oakland is home to a quarter of Alameda County residents yet more than half of the unhoused population. The City’s unhoused population has increased exponentially over the past decade. A lack of available housing is a huge part of the problem, but the housing market is only part of the story. Black and Indigenous people are homeless at rates 2 and 3 times higher than in the general population.¹⁸ These racial disparities are linked to centuries of structural racism that have excluded people of color from equal access to housing, community supports, and opportunities for economic mobility.¹⁹

Oakland sits on the unceded territory of Xučyun (Huichin), ancestral home of the Lisjan and Muwekma Ohlone people.²⁰ Today’s homelessness among Native people is directly tied to historical policies of genocidal land theft, displacement and ongoing socio economic exclusion.²¹

¹⁶ [Ordinances | Planning Code | Oakland, CA | Municode Library.](#)

¹⁷ [City of Grants Pass v. Johnson, 603 U.S. 520 \(2024\)](#), is a United States Supreme Court case in which the Court held that local government ordinances with civil and criminal penalties for camping on public land do not constitute cruel and unusual punishment even if there is no alternative shelter available. The case dates back to a 2018 class-action lawsuit filed by unsheltered individuals facing criminal charges and fines for camping outside. They brought the suit arguing that the city’s camping ban was cruel and unusual punishment because there was no shelter available to them. Both a federal judge and the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in their favor. These initial rulings were based on an earlier 9th Circuit Court of Appeals decision, [Martin v. Boise](#), which found that cities can’t punish people for sleeping outside if there’s nowhere else to go.

¹⁸ [Oakland PIT 2024 Infographic](#)

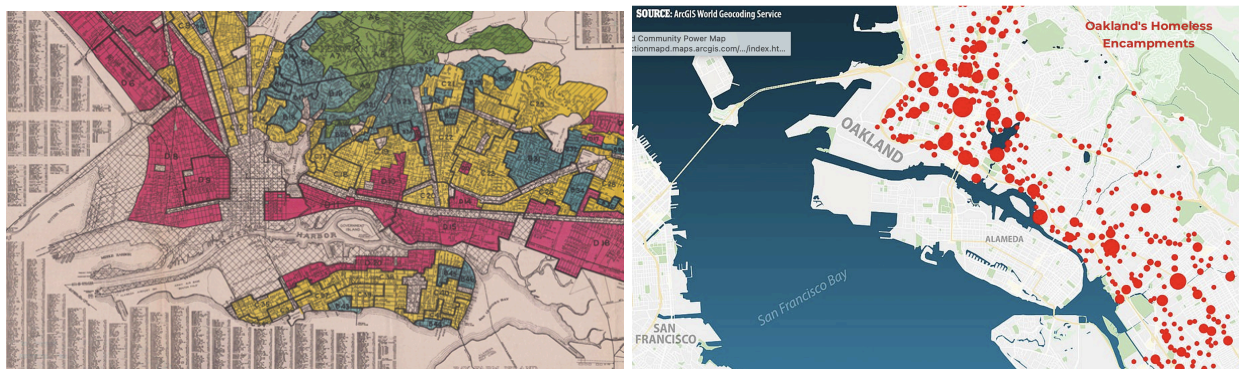
¹⁹ [Racial Discrimination in the Life Course of Older Adults Experiencing Homelessness: Results from the HOPE HOME Study,](#)

²⁰[Native Lands Mapping Project](#)

²¹ The mechanisms of land theft in so-called California, are particularly brutal and recent. In 1851, California’s first Governor, Peter Burnett, declared, “a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct.” Genocidal policies allowed for Native Californians to be massacred, enslaved and displaced so that white settlers could more easily claim the land and resources as their own. [8 Cents on the Dollar: The Brutal Economics of Stolen Lands in Sacramento](#)

Redlining²² and urban renewal²³ also have direct ties to the poverty and dispossession that are a significant factor in Black Oaklanders overrepresentation among the unhoused as well as the concentration of unsheltered communities in Historically Black Neighborhoods that remain under-resourced to this day. Today, unhoused people are concentrated in these areas, as can be seen below in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Side by Side Maps of Redlining and Homeless Encampments in Oakland



Side by side of an Oakland redlining map and a 2021 map of Oakland's homeless encampments showing a concentration of encampments in roughly the same area as the red "hazardous" section of the redlining map.²⁴

The negative impacts of policy on the unhoused population in Oakland will have an outsized impact on people of color whose experience of poverty and homelessness are directly linked to legacies of racial discrimination. In a City where diversity and equity are valued, policies that harm unhoused people should come under the strictest of scrutiny. Homelessness policy in Oakland is inherently racially discriminatory because the population it addresses is disproportionately made up of people of color. The population is also disproportionately made

²² New Deal Residential Security Maps of the mid- 1930s, aka redlining maps, identified "hazardous" neighborhoods deemed too risky for Federally insured mortgages. Areas with Black residents were deemed hazardous, appraisers insisted that "infiltration of Negroes necessitates hazardous rating." This kept homeownership and wealth-building out of reach for Black Oaklanders. [Mapping Inequality](#)

²³ In the decades before and after World War II, government bureaucracies across the U.S. imposed "urban renewal." Also known as "slum clearance", these policies demolished neighborhoods that were overwhelmingly Black and, to a lesser degree Asian and Latinx. Through eminent domain, residents were bought out of their homes for a paltry sum and their houses were replaced with highways, public housing, and top-down economic developments that appealed largely to white suburban commuters. In 1936, I.S. Shattuck, a city planning engineer, put together a report to identify and solve Oakland's "bad neighborhood" problem. One of Shattuck's proposed solutions was an infrastructural divide, cutting a freeway through the heart of West Oakland. In his report, Shattuck writes, "the housing advantage of this diagonal highway route is that it would segregate that portion of the district under discussion where non-white families are largely concentrated from the portion where they are relatively few in number."

[1937 Oakland Real Property Survey](#)

²⁴[performance audit of the city of oakland's homeless encampment management interventions & activities](#)

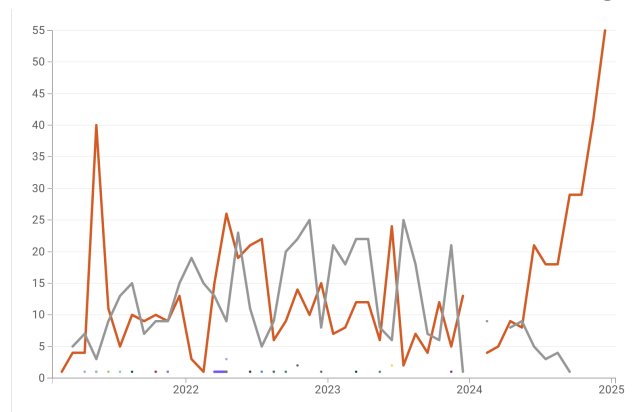
up of people who are veterans, disabled and LGBTQ+.²⁵ This makes homelessness policy one of the most important and potentially transformative fulcrums of equity in the City.

Centering Racial Equity, Key Findings:
Black and Indigenous people are unhoused at rates 2 and 3 times higher than they are present in the general population.
Racial disparities in Oakland's unhoused population are linked to centuries of racist policies of land theft, displacement and economic exclusion.
People who are veterans, disabled and LGBTQ+ are overrepresented among Oakland's unhoused population.
Oakland's homelessness policy disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities, creating both a critical opportunity to advance equity and a significant risk of causing discriminatory harm.

Encampment Closures Do Not Eliminate Encampments

Since passage of the EMP, encampment closures have become more frequent, year over year. From 2021 to 2024, the number of encampment closures increased by 45.68%.²⁶ According to the City's EMT operations dataset, the most recent escalation follows the *Grants Pass* decision with a sharp increase when it was issued June of 2024. In September of 2024 the number of closures skyrocketed following Mayor Thao's Executive Order to close encampments even if offerings of shelter could not be made. See Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Monthly Breakdown of Completed Encampment Management Team Operations



■ - "other" Encampment Management Team Operations
 ■ - Closures

Completed Encampment Management Team Operations 2/1/2021–12/31/2024

Source: Completed EMT Operations Dataset²⁷

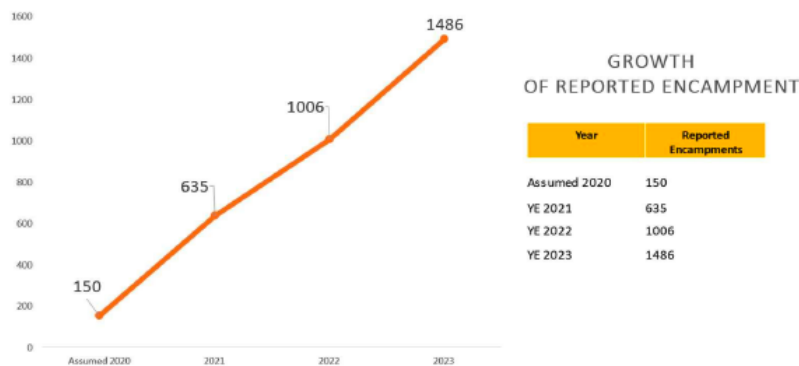
²⁵ [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Oakland city, California, HOMELESSNESS AMONG LGBT ADULTS in the US, What's house-hunting in Oakland like when you have a disability?, Point-in-Time Count - EveryOneHome.org.](#)

²⁶ [Special Meeting Commission on Homelessness Agenda - 04/23/2025](#) pg.26

²⁷ [Completed EMT Operations Dataset](#)

At the same time that encampment closures have become more frequent, reported “encampments” have increased by the hundreds.²⁸ In an EMP update to the City Council in April of 2024, data shows that every year since EMP implementation in 2020, reported encampments have increased by the hundreds, from 150 in 2020 to 1,486 at the end of 2023, as shown in Figure 3.²⁹ Increasing encampment closures do not seem to be reducing the number of reported encampments. A 2021 study of the spatial distribution of encampments in Oakland used Google Street Views to confirm that when encampments are closed, people migrate to form new communities nearby or join already existing communities.³⁰

Figure 3. Growth of Reported Encampments



Source: Encampment Management Policy Update April 2024

Interviewees for this report shared that it feels like the City is trying to make unsheltered people disappear. Sweeps do not solve their homelessness. People are being repeatedly displaced and moved from one area to the next until they end up back where they started. When this happens, the EMT conducts a “reoccurrence” operation. “Encampment operations may reoccur when shelter beds are insufficient, a location has been re-encamped, or previous operations did not achieve their objectives.³¹” Figure 4 from the April 2024 Supplemental EMP update shows the rates of reoccurrence for 2021, 22, & 23. In 2023 you can see that in one instance, the EMT had to return 11 times.

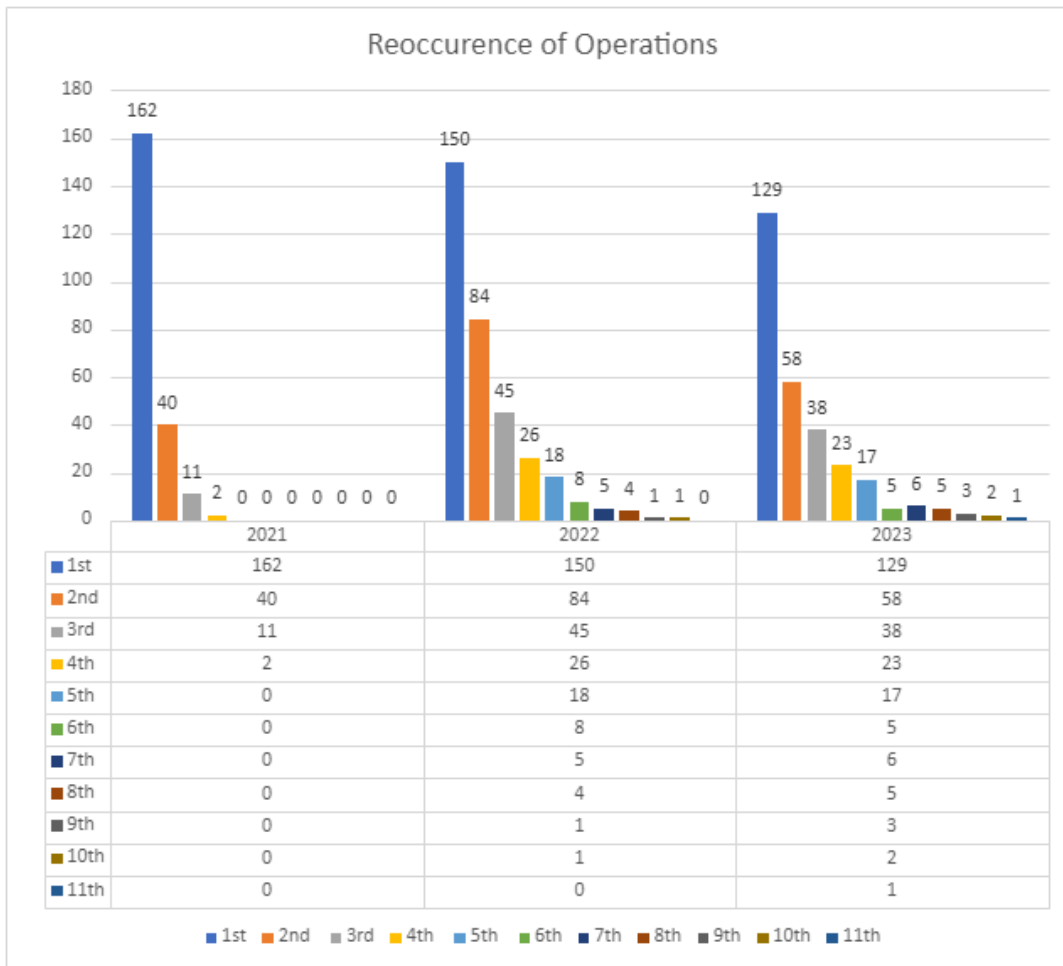
²⁸ [Encampment Management Policy Update April 2024](#) pg. 6

²⁹ [Encampment Management Policy Update April 2024](#) pg. 6

³⁰ [The Growth and Shifting Spatial Distribution of Tent Encampments in Oakland, California](#)

³¹ [April 2024 Supplement to Encampment Management Policy Update](#) page 3

Figure 4. Reoccurrence Rates 2021–23



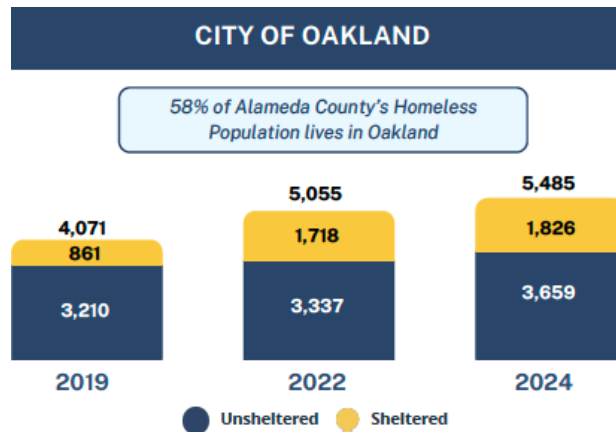
Source: April 2024 Supplement to EMP Update³²

John Janosko from Wood Street Commons summed up a frustration expressed by most interviewees, **“When it comes to the sweeps, they’re just a waste of everybody’s time, energy and money. We can see they’re just pushing people across the street and around the corner.”** All the while, unsheltered homelessness continues to grow. PIT counts from 2024 estimate that there are 3,659 people living unsheltered in Oakland, as shown in Figure 5.³³

³² [April 2024 Supplement to Encampment Management Policy Update](#) page 2

³³ Every 2 years, communities conduct counts of people experiencing both sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. The 2024 Alameda County Point-in-Time (PIT) Count was a community-wide effort conducted on January 25, 2024. The snapshot below includes people enrolled in shelter projects in Oakland on the night of January 24th and those interviewed or observed as experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the early morning hours of 1/25/24.

Figure 5. Sheltered and Unsheltered Homelessness in Oakland 2019–24



Source: 2024 Alameda County Point in Time Count

Lucy Kasdin, Director of Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless, expressed frustration with the whole process, **“these are human beings, they don’t just disappear. When you move them around, you’re actually leaving them in a worse position than they were. You’ve taken what shelter they had, what property they had, what kinship they had. You’re actually just causing profound harm to people without actually resolving their homelessness.”**

Encampment Closures Do Not Eliminate Encampments, Key Findings:
Despite increasing rates of encampment closures, Oakland is not successfully reducing numbers of encampments or people living unsheltered.
Unsheltered people are being displaced multiple times.
The EMT is conducting multiple “reoccurrence” operations.
Encampment closures are not an effective intervention to reduce encampments or get people off the streets.

Encampment Management Lacks Accountability and Transparency

A City audits of Oakland’s EMT released in 2021 found that the “City lacked an effective strategy for dealing with the growth of encampments.³⁴” Many of the audits’ recommendations were to improve oversight, service provision and outreach, property storage and notification. These issues were raised across the board by interviewees as persistently problematic. One oft repeated point among interviewees was that EMT claims about what happens during their operations are not accurate and that policies are not followed. Needa Bee explained, **“the City claims to have these policies in place that they follow, like that they always offer shelter to people and that they never throw people's things away, that they never tow vehicles that people live in. That is just a blatant lie. What we find is that they rarely offer shelter**

³⁴ [audit of the city of oakland's homeless encampment management interventions & activities, Press Releases - Oakland AuditorOakland Auditor](#) pg. 3

and if they do, it's not adequate. These communities that people are creating are for survival. They're way more stable than a couple of nights at St Vincent de Paul.³⁵

Interviewees shared frustration that the City does not take their feedback seriously. Their concerns are also supported by a significant body of research showing that sweeps make living unsheltered more dangerous and undermine peoples' ability to get into housing.³⁶ Nonetheless, there is an idea among City Officials that sweeps, while harmful, are the best way they have of helping people get into shelter.³⁷ This betrays a disconnect with the reality on the ground, where shelter placements are often not available during a closure.³⁸

It is not surprising that anyone not involved directly in an encampment closure would be unclear of their impact. Currently, public facing EMT data is largely limited to lists of upcoming and completed encampment operations containing only logistical details (date, location, intervention). Monthly EMT reports include boilerplate language about conducting outreach, coordinating shelter, providing resources, ensuring safety, and addressing health or environmental concerns, but no specific evidence or data is recorded to show that these actions occurred.³⁹ The reports measure EMT performance only by the number of encampment closures and deep cleanings completed, as illustrated in Figure 6, with no indicators related to residents' health or well-being.⁴⁰

³⁵ St. Vincent de Paul is a congregate shelter. If people are able to stay there, there is no guarantee of more than 1 night of shelter. There are also a lot of rules that make St. Vincent inaccessible that currently and formerly unhoused interviewees cited such as no pets, no kids, strict hours, very little property storage, congregate setting, lack of safety.

³⁶[Green sweeps: Ecological rationalities and homeless encampment pollution | PLOS Sustainability and Transformation](#), [Homeless Encampments and Involuntary Displacement](#), [HOUSING NOT HANDCUFFS 2021: STATE LAW SUPPLEMENT](#), [Population-Level Health Effects of Involuntary Displacement of People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness Who Inject Drugs in US Cities](#), [Impact of Encampment Sweeps on People Experiencing Homelessness](#), [Harms of encampment abatements on the health of unhoused people - ScienceDirect](#), [Health Impact of Street Sweeps from the Perspective of Healthcare Providers | Journal of General Internal Medicine](#), ['Forced to Become a Community': Encampment Residents' Perspectives on Systemic Failures, Precarity, and Constrained Choice | International Journal on Homelessness](#), [Protecting the Health and Well-Being of People Living Unsheltered by Stopping Forcible Displacement of Encampments](#), [Sweeping away survival: how anti-homeless laws & practices infringe on the fundamental right to survive](#),

³⁷ Encampment closures, or sweeps, refer to the practice of forcibly displacing communities of unsheltered people from a particular location, gatherings from a few to more than a hundred.

³⁸ Several interviewees for this report provide ongoing sweeps support and shared ongoing footage and reports from encampment closures. Often, people were told there is no shelter and no resources available.

³⁹ [EMT October Update](#)

⁴⁰ [ENCAMPMENT MANAGEMENT TEAM](#)

Figure 6. Key Performance Indicators, October 2024 EMT Update
KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

<p>Deep Cleaning Cleaning of an area with the option to return.</p>	<p>October 0</p>	<p>Cumulative 428</p>
<p>Full Closure & Partial Closure Complete/ Partial clearing of total area without option to return</p>	<p>October 29</p>	<p>Cumulative 681</p>

1. Cumulative metrics include data since launch January 1, 2021.

Source: October 2024 EMT Update.⁴¹

Oakland’s social media accounts and the Homelessness and Encampment Response Page occasionally post statements about the size of an encampment they have closed and how many people accepted shelter. Interviewees for this report emphasized that these statements typically undercount residents and exaggerate how many were actually sheltered. Unfortunately, there is no publicly accessible database tracking this information. However, for the highly publicized sweep at MLK near 23rd in September 2024, the City used state Encampment Resolution Funds (ERF), which required publicly reported outcomes. Despite initial claims that only 35–40 people lived there and that 25 were successfully placed in interim housing, the City’s 2025 ERF annual report confirmed that there were actually 88 residents, none of whom were placed in interim or permanent housing.⁴² This discrepancy highlights the importance of gathering feedback from impacted individuals to accurately understand conditions on the ground.

<p>Encampment Management Lacks Accountability and Transparency, Key Findings:</p>
<p>The EMT does not make public any data on outcomes for unsheltered people. Their public updates measure success by how many operations were completed.</p>
<p>Unsheltered people and their advocates dispute the accuracy of claims made by the EMT regarding the impact and outcomes of encampment closures.</p>
<p>Oakland’s report to the state regarding the MLK sweep contradicts EMT claims about</p>

⁴¹ [EMT October Update](#)

⁴² [City of Oakland Closes Longstanding Encampment on MLK Jr. Way, 2025 ERF Annual Report](#)

encampment size and shelter provision.

City policies do not reflect the research showing that sweeps make unsheltered homelessness worse and more dangerous.

Input from impacted people and their advocates is needed to understand the true impact of EMT operations and outcomes for people displaced by sweeps.

Shelters are Unavailable, Inadequate or Inaccessible

The 2024 Point-in-Time Count estimated that 5,490 people in Oakland are unhoused, with approximately 67% (3,659 individuals) living unsheltered in vehicles, tents, or makeshift shelters.⁴³ In April 2024, a City Council update on the EMP revealed that the EMT has access to only 571 beds to offer during a sweep, enough to shelter just 15% of the unsheltered population.⁴⁴ These beds include 165 single-night adult congregate shelter beds, 83 congregate family shelter beds available for 4–6 months and 323 community cabin beds, 100 of which are scheduled to be offline by June 2025.⁴⁵ On average, 0–40 of these 571 beds are “available” at any given time, with 0–33 beds offline for cleaning, further reducing the number of available shelter placements.⁴⁶ Figure 7 provides an excerpt from the report.

Figure 7. Excerpt from April EMP Update - Shelter Vacancies

Table 1

Average VACANT	2021	2022	2023
Community Cabins	2	3	2
RV Safe Parking	4	2	11
Shelter Single Adult*	14	10	26

Table 2

Average of OFFLINE	2021	2022	2023
Community Cabins	3	4	4
RV Safe Parking	1	2	9
Shelter Single Adult*	44	39	20

*Overnight shelter does not provide for dedicated ongoing residency

*These numbers include beds offline for program decompression

Table 1: Average of reported shelter vacancies per night.

Table 2: Average of those reported vacancies that are offline (unavailable).

Source: EMP Update- SUPPLEMENTAL 4/23/24⁴⁷

The lack of clarity regarding shelter availability during encampment closures is a significant concern, particularly given reports from interviewees who were offered shelter only to

⁴³[Oakland PIT 2024 Infographic](#) People living unsheltered per the Point in Time Count are also widely understood to be undercounted. [By the numbers: the 2022 Point-in-Time count results - Street Spirit](#)

⁴⁴ It is widely reported that Oakland has 1,300 shelter beds, but many of those beds are not available for the EMT to offer during an encampment closure. 112 beds are temporarily opened only in the winter. 544 of those beds are only available through placement from the Alameda County Coordinated Entry System (CES). 23 require placement from a waitlist. 50 are referred through their own outreach program. 1,300-112-544-23-50=571 [HSD-CHS Homelessness Interventions 4.3.24.pdf](#)

⁴⁵ [HSD-CHS Homelessness Interventions 4.3.24.pdf](#) The 100 Wood Street Cabins will be closing June 2025. [West Oakland homeless shelters will close in June — not March](#)

⁴⁶ [April 2024 Supplement to Encampment Management Policy Update](#) pg. 2–3

⁴⁷ [April 2024 Supplement to Encampment Management Policy Update](#) pg. 1–2

discover that it was not actually available. In Oakland's recent application for the fifth round of Homeless Housing, Assistance, and Prevention (HHAP) grant funding, the City stated that during encampment closures, they "match all unsheltered residents in identified intervention sites to shelter for ongoing support and services."⁴⁸ However, as observed during encampment closures, attested to throughout interviews and ongoing report-backs, and reported in EMT updates, everyone displaced during an encampment closure is assuredly not receiving shelter.

Shelters, particularly overnight congregate shelters, present significant barriers that make them largely inaccessible to unsheltered residents. The EMT often has a few of these beds available because they are unacceptable to most people due to their lack of stability and unsafe conditions. A County employee explained, "**They [the EMT] say 'everybody here was offered something.' Yes, because they know folks aren't going to take it. One out of probably 100 people is going to accept that bed at St Vincent [a congregate overnight shelter].**" Congregate shelters frequently do not accommodate ADA accessibility or medical needs, limit personal belongings, and do not accept children or pets. Strict entry and exit times make them inaccessible to those working late hours, and many have reported experiencing violence and trauma within these shelters. One interviewee stated, "**I know people who have been raped and sexually assaulted in the shelters. A lot of people don't want to go in because they're unsafe and because there's a dehumanizing kind of overarching culture.**"

Community cabin beds, which provide more than a single night of shelter, are less available but intended to offer transitional support with staff to assist residents in securing long-term housing. While some successfully transition to housing, many find the cabin experience difficult. The cabins consist of small, garden shed-style units ("Tuff Sheds"), shared by two people. Residents are not always given a choice of roommates, leading to conflicts. Interviewees described violent and unsafe encounters with roommates struggling with severe mental health issues, substance use, and other disruptive behavior. Jennifer Oakley managed to transition from the "Tuff Sheds" to housing, but her journey was harrowing, "**I told them, I am sober, don't put somebody with me that does a bunch of drugs. They moved in a young girl who uses needles. There were needles all over the place.**"

The cabins consist of a garden shed container home (hence their previous designation, the "Tuff Sheds") to be shared by two people. Residents are not always given a choice of who they live with in such tight quarters. Interviewees shared about violent and harmful encounters with roommates who had significant mental health or behavioral issues, drug use and other inappropriate behavior. Jennifer Oakley managed to transition from the "Tuff Sheds" to housing, but her journey was harrowing, "**I told them, I am sober, don't put somebody with me that does a bunch of drugs. They moved in a young girl who uses needles. There were needles all over the place.**"

Living conditions in the cabins are also problematic. Interviewees reported persistent issues such as backed-up toilets, mold in showers, and military-style management. Many

⁴⁸ [HHAP Round 5 Application](#)

residents face constant threats of eviction and a lack of stability, with some being abruptly sent back to the streets. Photos of raw sewage leaking from the Wood Street Cabins into the street are included in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Raw Sewage at Wood St. Community Cabins 3/6/2025



Photo credit: Jennifer Oakley

Shelters are Unavailable, Inadequate or Inaccessible, Key Findings:

Oakland has shelter beds for only 15% of the unsheltered population, leaving the majority without shelter during closures.

The beds most available are unstable, inaccessible or unacceptable to most people.

The EMT is incapable of offering shelter to most people during encampment closures, contradicting claims on HHAP grant applications.

People displaced during sweeps are sometimes incorrectly offered shelter that is not actually available.

Congregate shelters offer little more than a temporary stay (some as few as 1 night). Unsheltered people are most commonly exited back to the street from congregate and cabin shelter alike.

Many unsheltered people have had traumatic experiences in shelters and conditions can be dangerous, unhygienic and degrading.

Sweeps Particularly Harm Elders and People with Disabilities

Sweeps cause severe harm to elderly and disabled residents, who are overrepresented among Oakland's unsheltered population. Older adults are the fastest-growing segment of the unhoused, and many rely on community support for daily survival.⁴⁹ Interviewees described numerous incidents where ADA accommodations were ignored during sweeps, leaving vulnerable residents without essential support. Tiny from POOR Magazine recounted a sweep in West Oakland, stating, **“Most of the elders were gravely disabled. There were no ADA requirements being followed at all. That’s a federal law, and these people are acting like it doesn’t matter. And that all goes back to the fact that as houseless people, our bodies, our lives and our rights do not matter. It’s terrifying, really, holding all that in our heart.”**

Congregate shelters, which provide only the most basic ADA accommodations and pack people in close quarters, are an impossibility for many disabled or immunocompromised people. More often than not, people with accessibility and health needs end up right back on the street without medication and disconnected from their community and service providers.

Sweeps are intensely stressful, physically demanding, and traumatic experiences. Residents are forced to dismantle their homes under the watch of bulldozers, city workers, and police, making quick decisions about what to keep and what to abandon. This process is emotionally triggering, especially as sweeps are often recurring events in people's lives. The cycle of displacement, loss, and uncertainty takes a severe toll on mental health.⁵⁰ Interviewees discussed how people with serious mental illness lose lucidity after sweeps, leading to involuntary psychiatric holds known as a “5150⁵¹” in institutions that operate more like a prison than a care facility.⁵² Returning from a psychiatric hold, many find their belongings gone and their community dispersed. Some are transferred from psychiatric care to jail for behaviors exacerbated by the trauma of displacement. Santa Rita Jail has effectively become Alameda County's largest mental health facility due to the shortage of care provided elsewhere.⁵³

Sweeps Particularly Harm Elders and People with Disabilities, Key Findings:

⁴⁹ [Oakland 2022 Point In Time Count, The fastest-growing homeless population? Seniors](#)

⁵⁰ [Impact of Encampment Sweeps on People Experiencing Homelessness](#)

⁵¹ 5150 is the number of the section of the Welfare and Institutions Code, which allows an adult who is experiencing a mental health crisis to be involuntarily detained for a 72- hour psychiatric hospitalization.

⁵² [Notice Regarding Investigation of Alameda County, John George Psychiatric Hospital, and Santa Rita Jail](#)

⁵³ [Notice Regarding Investigation of Alameda County, John George Psychiatric Hospital, and Santa Rita Jail](#)

During sweeps, ADA accommodations are often not provided, leaving elderly and disabled residents without necessary support.

Congregate shelters frequently lack adequate accommodations for disabled or immunocompromised people, forcing them back onto the streets.

The trauma of repeated displacement exacerbates mental health symptoms, leading to involuntary psychiatric holds and increased criminalization.

Sweeps Sever Connections to Care Providers

Many people living unsheltered carry scars from discrimination, degradation, broken promises and other harms from institutions that have failed them or provided empty promises. Outreach and service providers, the most effective of whom have lived experience with homelessness themselves, build relationships by meeting people where they are. This can be a painstaking process that takes months or even years, but is often necessary to break through fear and mistrust to provide people the care and resources they deserve. These trusted providers are often the touchpoint for benefit applications, housing assessments, wait list/lottery monitoring and coordinated entry processes for permanent housing placements. Losing connection with providers, as often happens after a sweep, can sabotage those processes, as well as the trusted relationship. After years of waiting, it is not unusual for a housing voucher to become available but go unused (and then the case closed) because the encampment where the client had been living has now been cleared, and residents cannot be located after being dispersed.⁵⁴

Vincent Ray Williams III is a formerly unhoused organizer and founder of [Urban Compassion Project](#), an organization providing clean up services and case management to unhoused communities. Here, he describes the aftermath of sweeps and what it means to lose hard earned relationships and trust from their unhoused clients, **“What ends up happening (after sweeps) is that the grassroots nonprofit providers (without City contracts or funding) that are actually putting the footwork in within the community, have to bear the burden of not only losing clients across the city of Oakland, but also helping them when their IDs have been thrown away, social security cards, EBT cards, everything that they need. Phones just tossed in the trash.**

When people are herded like cattle from one area to another, you lose people. Not only that, but what ends up happening is that, say you're a client of ours; it may have taken a year for us to develop a relationship with you. Finally, you trust us to work with you and we're making motions towards finding you stable housing and mental health resources. We make a plan to get you into a drug treatment program. I tell you, 'Okay, I'll be back to pick you up on Friday.' But on Thursday they closed the encampment. Now we've lost connection, but also your mindset goes back to 'F* the nonprofits and the City of Oakland, because you guys promised me you were going to help me, and now you just took all my stuff!' So we just lost, bigtime.”**

⁵⁴ [Families Wait Years for Housing Vouchers Due to Inadequate Funding | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

Displacement also disrupts provider management of infectious diseases like HIV and hepatitis C, or treatment of wounds that require regular attention to avoid infections. All of this undermines the provider health management that happens on the ground, worsens health status from interrupted care, and transfers that increased need to overtaxed emergency rooms at a much higher cost to the community.⁵⁵

Sweeps Sever Connections to Care Providers, Key Findings:
Care providers build trust with unsheltered residents over months or years to connect them with housing, benefits, and treatment programs. Sweeps disrupt these relationships, causing clients to lose contact with essential services and sabotaging ongoing care plans.
Interruptions in care from sweeps can have severe health consequences for those managing chronic conditions like HIV, hepatitis C, and untreated wounds.
Lost connections to care result in increased reliance on emergency services, escalating costs for the City.
Repeated displacement destroys trust in outreach workers and service providers making future engagement less likely and further entrenching people in homelessness.

Sweeps Cause Loss of Property Needed for Housing and Survival

In 2018, Needa Bee Miralle and other residents of the Housing and Dignity Village⁵⁶ community sued the City of Oakland after a particularly violent sweep that trashed their tents, carefully constructed tiny homes and belongings. The Miralle lawsuit won the plaintiffs \$250,000 in damages and implemented changes to the EMP prohibiting sweeps in foul weather and requiring adequate notice of eviction, storage of property and offer of shelter for any sweeps the City engaged in.⁵⁷

Despite these reforms, violations persist. On March 21, 2025, a sweep on 34th Street between Wood and Mandela was conducted without notice, shelter offers, or time for residents to collect their belongings. Heavy equipment crushed a dwelling unit, narrowly missing a cat. Interviewees who regularly provide support during sweeps reported multiple incidences where displaced residents were told that no services or shelter would be provided during closures.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ [Health Impact of Street Sweeps from the Perspective of Healthcare Providers](#)

⁵⁶ Housing and Dignity Village was a safe and sober self-made living space of tents and tiny homes created by unhoused people and their allies. There were roughly 13 residents, most of them women and children. The community resided on a plot of city-owned land that had been vacant since 2008 in the Brookfield neighborhood of East Oakland. There was a community kitchen, shared living space, and a medic’s tent stocked full of donated medical supplies. The Village often hosted community meals where they were joined by neighborhood residents, many of whom were low-income or food insecure.

⁵⁷ [When can Oakland close a homeless camp? Big changes underway](#)

⁵⁸ Many of these incidents are relayed on a social media account run by an anonymous group of residents who provide support at nearly all of Oakland’s sweeps. Two of them were interviewed for this report. Please check out these stories and their important work on Instagram [@oakland.revealed](#)

Across the board, interviewees complained that during sweeps, property is not properly stored and often destroyed. Between 2021 and 2024, with over 637 “encampment closures,” only 12 instances of property storage were documented by Oakland Public Works.⁵⁹ **“I have gone to hundreds of sweeps Since 2016 and I have seen them bag and tag probably four times total. And the very few times it has happened, people do not get their belongings back. Mostly, what I have witnessed is people’s belongings being trashed and stolen,”** shared founding member of Love and Justice in the Streets, an organization that provides direct assistance to unhoused communities.

Lost property can have potentially deadly consequences for people who lose medication, medical devices and mobility devices like wheelchairs, canes and walkers. In a local UCSF study, [Health Impact of Street Sweeps from the Perspective of Healthcare Providers](#), a Medical Doctor attests to the difficulty getting their patients’ medication replaced. **“It is extremely difficult to get medications replaced! Insurance companies... do not want to replace lost or stolen medications and this often takes many phone calls, paperwork, extensive advocacy to get people their medications—often resulting in the patient not being on medication for weeks to even months.”**

The loss of vital records during sweeps creates significant barriers to exiting homelessness. Photo identification is essential for accessing housing, healthcare, employment, financial aid, and food assistance. Without ID, individuals are more likely to be cited and fingerprinted by police, increasing their risk of criminalization and straining police resources. Housing opportunities, often determined through lotteries and unpredictably long waits on housing lists, can be missed without proper identification. Replacing lost IDs, prescriptions, and other vital records can take months and may be financially unattainable, further entrenching people in homelessness.

Sweeps Cause Loss of Property Needed for Housing and Survival, Key Findings:
During sweeps, vital property is lost or destroyed despite EMP storage requirements.
Loss of medications and medical devices creates life-threatening risks.
Loss of vital records creates barriers to exiting homelessness.

Sweeps Increase Mortality of Unsheltered People

According to the 2023 Homeless Mortality Report published by Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless and Community Assessment, Planning, and Evaluation (CAPE), the median age of death for unhoused people countywide is just 54—23 years younger than the general population median of 77.⁶⁰ Studies have shown that sweeps directly contribute to this increase in mortality by destroying life saving medications, increasing the fatality of overdoses in

⁵⁹ [Bag & Tag Form Athol Tennis Courts.pdf - NextRequest - Modern FOIA & Public Records Request Software](#), [DOC101724.pdf - NextRequest - Modern FOIA & Public Records Request Software](#)

⁶⁰ [Alameda County Homeless Mortality Report Calendar Year 2023 Executive Summary](#) pg. 3

isolation, creating instability that leads to disrupted management of chronic conditions, increased injuries, and worsened mental health.⁶¹

A recent study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) found that encampment sweeps significantly increase overdose deaths, hospitalizations, and life-threatening infections while hindering access to overdose treatment. Principal investigator, Dr. Joshua Barocas stated, “[Sweeps,] we predict, will contribute up to 25% of the deaths among this population over a 10-year period. To put that a different way, it means our states and our cities are literally killing people with this.”

Sweeps further endanger lives by dismantling essential shelter and discarding personal belongings without providing viable alternatives. During encampment closures, tents and temporary shelters are often destroyed, leaving residents exposed to extreme temperatures. Unhoused people die from exposure to heat or cold at a rate 75.5 times higher than the general population, a statistic that highlights the lethal consequences of displacing people without ensuring safe, sanctioned shelter in return.⁶² An interviewee who regularly provides sweeps support described a recent event where someone willingly gave up their tent because they were promised shelter, only to be told the shelter offered was not actually available and no alternative arrangements would be made. **"At the sweep at 23rd and MLK, two people accepted offers of cabin placements. Their tents were thrown away while they waited for hours, only to find out that night the cabin spots weren't available. Now they have nothing—no shelter, no belongings, nowhere to go."**

Sweeps Increase Mortality of Unsheltered People, Key Findings:
Sweeps directly contribute to the increased mortality rates of unsheltered people.
The median age of death for unhoused people in Alameda County is 23 years younger than the general population.
Exposure deaths are 75.5 times higher among unhoused people, making the loss of tents, RVs, vehicles and makeshift shelter that often happens during sweeps especially dangerous.
Displacing unsheltered people without providing improved and appropriate living conditions is life threatening.

Curbside Communities Help People Survive

Community living is a customary mechanism of survival for people forced to live outside. Unsheltered communities are a global phenomenon; more than one billion people live in what the United Nations calls “informal settlements” worldwide.⁶³ Unsheltered communities in Oakland have become a necessary adaptation to a humanitarian crisis that fill critical gaps in

⁶¹ [Health Impact of Street Sweeps from the Perspective of Healthcare Providers - PMC](#)

⁶² [Alameda County Homeless Mortality Report Calendar Year 2023 Executive Summary](#) pg. 7

⁶³ [Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable](#)

housing, healthcare, and caregiving.⁶⁴ Residents create peer support networks that provide mental health comfort, protect each other from harm, and care for those who cannot care for themselves. Peer support is a well recognized method of care in informal community settings; it is the basis of all 12 step groups, and its effectiveness is increasingly being recognized in formal healthcare and behavioral health systems.⁶⁵ Every source, from public health researchers to the residents' own testimonies, confirms that "encampments" offer benefits essential for survival and well-being.⁶⁶

Interviewees spoke of how life saving their connection to their "street family" is, helping them to cope with their daily life and better their situation. Surviving without shelter is an experience that brings unavoidable trauma, discrimination and stigmatization. Connection to a community of peers, people who understand and share those experiences and identity, is an important part of coping with and overcoming their detrimental impacts.⁶⁷ This is especially consequential for people with Serious Mental Illness (SMI). A sense of safety and routine is essential for those with PTSD and other mental illnesses. Care providers shared how their clients with SMI are severely compromised by sweeps, undermining their painstaking work to build trust and safety that may have taken months or years to establish.

There are innumerable practical services that unsheltered people provide for each other in the communities they create. Caretaking resources are often not available to people through more conventional means.⁶⁸ Elders, people with disabilities and people with other unique needs often depend on care from their community that is essential to their survival. Living in community is an important mechanism of survival for unhoused people that is well supported by research from public health officials, government entities, and plenty of other traditionally recognized experts.⁶⁹ Sweeping these communities dismantles the mutual aid networks that are literally keeping people alive.⁷⁰

Curbside Communities Help People Survive, Key Findings:
Unsheltered communities facilitate peer support that can help people cope with trauma, addiction, discrimination and social exclusion/stigma.
Peer communities create a sense of safety and routine vital for those with PTSD and other mental health conditions.

⁶⁴ [Toward a New Understanding The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness](#)

⁶⁵ [Engaging with peers to integrate community care: Knowledge synthesis and conceptual map - Panaite - 2024 - Health Expectations - Wiley Online Library](#)

⁶⁶ [Protecting the Health and Well-Being of People Living Unsheltered by Stopping Forcible Displacement of Encampments, With city support lacking, mutual aid groups step up to help unhoused people - Oakland North, Oakland Sweeps Beach Encampment Where Unhoused Residents Sued to Stay Put | KQED](#)

⁶⁷ [Engaging with peers to integrate community care: Knowledge synthesis and conceptual map](#)

⁶⁸ [Health Care Services in Alameda County: Homeless Individuals Describe Their Experiences](#)

⁶⁹ [Forced Evictions and Human Rights, To Tent and Protect: Homeless encampments as "protective facilities", Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context](#)

⁷⁰ [Letter: East 12 St Encampment to Oakland](#)

Unsheltered communities provide caregiving and mutual aid that are scarce through conventional services, especially for elders, people with disabilities, and those with chronic health conditions.

Dismantling communities that provide care and services to people with significant emotional and physical health needs would also remove that care.

Financial Cost

The true cost of encampment closures is difficult to quantify, but the 2021 audit of the EMT has provided the most comprehensive estimates. They found that Oakland spent approximately \$12.6 million in direct costs on encampment interventions between fiscal years 2018–2020.⁷¹ Based on available data, the EMT conducted approximately 500 closures, re-closures, and cleanings during the audit period. Dividing the total \$12.6 million cost by the number of operations suggests an average cost of \$25,000 per event, though actual costs likely vary. Larger closures and re-closures would incur higher expenses due to the need for additional crews and multi-day operations.⁷² The City Auditor estimated that each encampment closure costs approximately \$1,464 per hour in personnel and equipment, including staff from Public Works, Police, and other city agencies.⁷³ Despite the high costs, the City has no formal budget or comprehensive tracking system for encampment closures, obscuring the true financial impact. Sweeps incur significant costs, none of which contribute to new housing or solving the homelessness crisis. As has been shown, there is plenty of evidence that forcible displacement actually entrenches unsheltered homelessness and certainly makes it more dangerous.

Financial Costs, Key Takeaways:

Rough estimates from a 2021 EMT audit put the cost of closures at \$1,464/hr.

The EMT does not operate with a formal budget, making the true cost of their operations impossible to quantify.

From 2018–2020, the average cost per EMT operation was \$25,000.

⁷¹ [Performance Audit of the City of Oakland's Homeless Encampment Management Interventions & Activities](#) pg 46

⁷² [Performance Audit of the City of Oakland's Homeless Encampment Management Interventions & Activities](#) pg. 56

⁷³ [Performance Audit of the City of Oakland's Homeless Encampment Management Interventions & Activities](#) pg. 49

Beyond Involuntary Displacement: Supporting the Safety and Well-Being of Unsheltered Oaklanders

We know that there's not going to be enough housing produced in the next year, two years, 10 years, to be able to house everyone that's unhoused right now. What I would like to see, what my community would like to see, are interim self governed communities.

-John Janosko, Wood Street Commons

Sanctuary Communities

The most important takeaway from this report is that Oakland must engage with the prolific network of expertise around and within the unsheltered community. The people serving and living in “encampments” are the most important resource that Oakland has to begin to understand and effectively address the crisis of unsheltered homelessness.

So what could Oakland do instead of forcibly displacing unsheltered people who have nowhere to go? Support them to stay. Organizers with Wood Street Commons (WSC) and other advocates are urging the City to establish Sanctuary Communities, extending Oakland’s sanctuary city protections to its unhoused residents. Sanctuary Communities would operate on publicly owned or leased land with the City’s consent and support, providing essential resources like water, bathrooms, and trash services. These communities would consist of unsheltered residents living in tents or tiny homes under self-governance, with support from community organizations and a nonprofit partner like WSC. They may start with a smaller pilot program of 30-50 people, but depending on the size and permanence of the site, communities could easily function with 100 residents and be replicated at appropriate locations.⁷⁴ WSC has developed a proposal for a Pilot Sanctuary Community in Oakland, detailed in Appendix B.

Sanctuary Communities (SC) offer safe and supportive living spaces for unhoused individuals, prioritizing resident leadership and autonomy. Successful examples include Seattle Housing and Resource Effort (SHARE) and Pu’uhonua O Wai’anae (POW) in Oahu, both of which have outperformed other modalities of shelter in terms of positive outcomes and transitions to housing for their residents. Seattle and Oahu, like Oakland, are cities where a high cost of living and lack of affordable housing have led to massive growth in unsheltered homelessness. Extended case-studies of SHARE and POW based on interviews with residents, organizers and foundational partners can be found in Appendix C.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Seattle Housing and Resource Effort (SHARE) operates 5 Tent Cities in Seattle that have up to 100 people each. They shared that through years of trial and error, they have found that 100 people is the limit for a safe and well functioning Tent City. They also rotate locations on a quarterly or longer basis, which contributes to the need to limit the number of residents. Pu’ uhonu O Wai’anae (POW) is an unsheltered village in Oahu that operates with 300 people on the principle of community first, recognizing that their community is the most important resource they have to maintain stability, security and function of their village.

⁷⁵ Foundational documents shared by SHARE for reference such as a management plan, security duties, neighborhood meeting outreach flyer, health and safety guidelines, grievance policy and code of conduct can be found here: [SHARE Tent City 5](#)

This section expands on WSC’s Pilot Program, providing detailed recommendations for City consideration and potential support. It outlines work WSC has already been doing on the ground to make the setup of a community advisory board and outreach to interested unsheltered people viable. WSC is already connected to a diverse and experienced Advisory Council, including leaders experienced in peer-led communities. It also provides information about internal governance, safety and security strategies, identifies proposed sites, and quantifies cost and funding considerations.

Community Engagement

A core principle of this plan is that the community be governed by its residents, an approach that research and lived experience indicate builds community and personal stability. Part of setting people up for successful self-governance is to provide them with a network of community support. Trusted organizations already connected to the unsheltered community like WSC make an excellent community partner to serve as the contracting organization with the City, and help to formalize an Advisory Council from their expansive network of connection to local service providers and organizations.⁷⁶

Wood Street Commons (WSC) has consistently held public Town Hall meetings to engage the community. They are currently conducting outreach and canvassing in Oakland neighborhoods where they aim to implement long-term solutions to homelessness, including housing, community resources, and support services. For the past two years, WSC has collaborated with renowned affordable housing architect Mike Pyatok, FAIA,⁷⁷ to develop plans for multiple sites that would provide permanent housing for unsheltered individuals, low-income residents, and teachers.⁷⁸ The proposed projects also include a community center and academy offering resources, training, and educational programs focused on educational advancement, financial literacy, and skills development to support long-term stability.

As part of developing its permanent housing plans, Wood Street Commons (WSC) has been building support with neighborhood groups, a strategy that could also benefit the launch of Sanctuary Communities in the same areas. West Oakland Neighbors have been meeting with WSC for some time and have agreed to submit a letter of support to the City. WSC has also garnered support from City and County officials, as well as organizations like St. Mary’s Center. This established goodwill provides a strong foundation for fostering essential relationships with housed neighbors.

⁷⁶ Please see the WSC Pilot Program proposal in Appendix B for a list of organizations and service providers that they have a working relationship with.

⁷⁷ Michael Pyatok is a prominent affordable housing architect whose office has developed more than 35,000 units since it was opened in 1984. He is widely known for his expertise in the development and design of low-income and affordable housing, recognized as a Fulbright Scholar in Helsinki, Finland and a Loeb Fellow at Harvard University.

⁷⁸ [Our Solutions | woodstreetcommons.org](http://OurSolutions|woodstreetcommons.org)

Sanctuary Communities in other cities have shown that, despite initial opposition, neighbors often come to understand and accept these communities, recognizing their value and dispelling fears about unsheltered residents. Wood Street Commons (WSC) has experienced similar shifts through its community outreach, demonstrating how building relationships and addressing concerns can change perceptions. In Oakland, unsheltered people have been marginalized and disconnected from housed residents, partly due to City policies that treat them as nuisances to be removed at the request of complaining neighbors. A public shift by the City toward compassion and partnership with unsheltered residents could significantly reduce harmful stereotypes and foster greater community integration.⁷⁹

Internal Governance

Internal self governance means that ultimately, residents will determine their day to day rules and organization of site services. Ultimately, whatever system is negotiated could serve as a toolkit for governance that can be replicated at additional sites and perhaps eventually integrated into WSC's permanent housing and resource center plans.⁸⁰ Sanctuary Community residents may later transition into service positions at the City's Cabin programs, transitional housing, and any other programs designed for unsheltered people. These are merely suggestions for a self-governance framework based off of case studies from [SHARE/WHEEL](#), [POW](#) and research into other successful self-governed communities like [Homefulness](#), [Youth Spirit Artworks](#), and [Safe Organized Spaces](#):

- **Employment of Residents:** A key part of self-governance is resident responsibility for site management tasks from those who are able. With no budget, this would be a type of sweat-equity investment in a shared community. If funds are available, roles could come with a stipend. These could be rotated or shared roles. Funding for stipends can be fundraised or come from the City's budget for encampment management that typically goes toward outside contractors. Employing residents not only provides income but also builds skills and responsibility – and it deters problems, because people take pride in a job well done in their own community.
These are some examples of part-time roles needed for camp residents:
 - **Sanitation lead:** ensures trash goes in the dumpster, coordinates monthly volunteer cleanups.
 - **Maintenance lead:** checks the toilets, restocks supplies, handles minor repairs.
 - **Security lead:** organizes neighborhood watch rotations at night, communicates with nearby housed neighbors or businesses.
- **Resident Council and Leadership:** The camp's residents will form a council or committee (5–7 members, elected or consensus-chosen) to make decisions about daily operations, conflict resolution, and enforcing community agreements.

⁷⁹ The ACLU put out a comprehensive report, [The Legal War Against Unhoused People](#) about how legal stigmatization and discrimination toward unhoused people entrenches homelessness and magnifies suffering.

⁸⁰ [Our Solutions | woodstreetcommons.org](#)

For example, a council may set guidelines on quiet hours, cleanliness of shared areas, and how new members join the community.

- **Partner Organization Role:** Wood Street Commons could serve as a core partner and the contracting body with the City and other service providers or workers. They would be integral in the initial establishment of an SC and could arrange for fiscal sponsorship, training, insurance, etc. The partner org. would attend weekly community meetings, help mediate serious conflicts, and liaise with the City and Community Council as needed, but they would not “manage” the residents – rather, they serve to support and stand behind the residents’ decisions.

Security and Fire Safety

A self-governed camp will have residents handling many of their own disputes and security concerns. Professional training in de-escalation, mediation, and trauma-informed response will empower the community to manage conflicts peacefully. WSC is connected to local organizations that have expertise in this area. Potential partners include Mental Health First, Oakland, a project of the Anti Police-Terror Project that trains people in nonviolent crisis intervention, or Crisis Support Services of Alameda County, which has experience in counseling and de-escalation.

Fire is a known risk in unsheltered communities, so proactive measures are critical. Any Sanctuary Community should have multiple fire extinguishers on site and basic training in their use. For 30 people spread over a site, there should be at least 3–4 ABC fire extinguishers mounted in key locations. Cost estimate: roughly \$80 per extinguisher, so ~\$300 total for equipment. Additionally, the Oakland Fire Department or a safety training provider should conduct a basic fire safety training for residents. There are resources for such trainings online, as well as first aid/cpr trainings. They are also offered at universities, and OFD may be willing to provide trainings onsite.

Additional Costs: Infrastructure and Services (based on 30-40 person community)

Item	Cost per	Total
Sleeping/Living Space		
3–4 ABC fire extinguishers. ⁸¹	\$80	\$320
25–30 durable all weather tents. ⁸²	\$200	\$6,000

⁸¹ [Fire Extinguisher Depot](#)

⁸² [Coleman Skydome 4-Person Tent with Full-Fly Vestibule](#)

2 pop up canopies. ⁸³	\$1,000	\$2,000
30 tent platforms 3.9' x 3.9'. ⁸⁴	\$105	\$3,150
Electricity: standby generator unit and monthly cost ⁸⁵	\$2,500 \$900/mo	\$2,500 \$900/mo
Fence- difficult to estimate cost without knowing area. Estimate from Home Depot's "average cost of fence installation." ⁸⁶	\$6,500	\$6,500
Basic Needs/Hygiene		
30 memberships Planet Fitness exercise/shower. ⁸⁷	\$15/mo \$49/yr	\$450/mo \$1,470/yr
WeHOPE/Dignity on Wheels (DOW) mobile showers just opened an office in Oakland, potential for receiving their mobile hygiene services. ⁸⁸	\$0	-
4 Portable toilets (1 ADA accessible). Oakland typically contracts in bulk; in 2020 the City was maintaining 40 locations with toilets & wash stations. ⁸⁹ Additional units on the same contract would likely produce significant savings.	\$250/mo	\$1,000/yr
4 Hand Washing Stations. ⁹⁰	\$150/mo	\$600/mo
Garbage Collection- 3 cubic yard bin with weekly service, ⁹¹ though this cost could likely be reduced significantly by joining Oakland Public Works' containerized garbage program currently serving unsheltered communities. ⁹²	\$684/mo	\$684/mo
Water: Water can be provided via a portable EBMUD hydrant meter, which allows the water to be tracked and paid for, and administered in a way that preserves the hydrant and filters the water. The East Oakland Collective is the owner of a portable hydrant meter account and spends about \$6,000/yr. to provide water to multiple unsheltered communities. ⁹³	\$200/mo⁹⁴	\$200/mo

⁸³ The City's ERF budget had \$2,000/per for communal tents for 100 people, so ~\$1,000/per for less than 50 people seems a safe estimate. [Oakland - Encampment Resolution Funding Program \(ERF\) Narrative](#).

⁸⁴ [LXSEHN Plastic Pallet, Waterproof Storage Grid Pad, Lightweight Nestable Floor Pallets](#)

⁸⁵ [How Much Does A Generator Cost in 2025? \(Portable vs. Standby\)](#)

⁸⁶ [Cost to Install Fencing – The Home Depot](#)

⁸⁷ [Planet Fitness membership fees](#)

⁸⁸ [WeHOPE Celebrates 150,000 Showers for Bay Area Homeless and Opens New Office in Oakland](#)

⁸⁹ [Encampment Management Implementation Strategy](#) page 7

⁹⁰ [Portable Hand Wash Station | Two Self-Contained Sinks](#)

⁹¹ [City of Oakland Monthly Trash and Compost Collection Service Rates for Businesses](#)

⁹² [Supplemental Information Pertaining to the 2020 Encampment Management Policy](#) page 7

⁹³ [New program lets homeless residents access clean drinking water from fire hydrants](#)

⁹⁴ Cost would need to be worked out with East Oakland Collective or an account set up with EBMUD.

Total Startup Costs	Startup	\$25,774
Recurrent Monthly Costs	Monthly	\$3,834
Total Costs Year 1 (monthly * 12 + startup)	Year 1	\$71,782

This is a tally of the bare bones costs needed to establish a Sanctuary Community. There are several variables that would influence total actual costs. Ideally, the City would pay to provide some of the basic needs services to the community and provide public or publicly leased land for the community to live on. These costs certainly leave a lot of areas for improvement, but laying the groundwork for a safer, stable community where people are not at risk of displacement costs about as much as one low- to mid-range City salary.

More time, volunteer labor and a higher budget could allow for additional features:

- Stipends for residents
- Salaried dedicated staff person
- On site case management/ housing navigators
- Community amenities: kitchen, food, cleaning materials, hygiene products,
- Improved disability access: elevated beds and other accessibility accommodations for people with disabilities.
- On site storage
- Tiny homes
- Community gardens and entertainment areas
- Transportation
- Child/pet care
- On site service/classes/training
- Fundraising events
- Any number of community driven possibilities...

Funding Options

- **Measure Q (Oakland 2020 Parks and Homeless Services Parcel Tax):** Measure Q is a parcel tax with 30% of funds (~\$6.3 million/yr) earmarked for “services to address homelessness,” including temporary shelter and sanitary services.⁹⁵
- **State Grants: Encampment Resolution Fund (ERF)** grants specifically target encampment solutions and **Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention (HHAP)** grants provide flexible, annual funding that can easily incorporate this pilot into existing “temporary shelter with innovative approaches” strategies.
- **Measure W (Vacant Property Tax):** Measure W generates millions annually for homeless and housing services. Nearly \$400 million will soon be available to Alameda county after litigation delays.
- **Community Fundraising and Volunteer Contributions:** While larger funding should come from institutional sources, it is likely that Oakland would offer community support,

⁹⁵ [Oakland Voters Expand Homeless Services by Passing Measure Q | National Low Income Housing Coalition](#)

especially with the involvement of WSC and their larger network. Local businesses might sponsor specific items, and WSC already has extensive experience working with volunteers to build shelter and community structures.⁹⁶

Location

Oakland has several vacant or underutilized public parcels that could host a Sanctuary Community. The following sites have capacity for 30–100 people, proximity to transit and services, public ownership (City, BART, Caltrans, etc.), and no active use or construction in the immediate future. These sites have also been identified by Wood Street Commons and architect Mike Pyatok as potential locations for permanent housing and resource center developments. They have been working closely with local community members, as well as City and County officials, to build support for the plans they have created together.⁹⁷ These would be ideal locations for Sanctuary Communities in the meantime.

Figure 9. CalTrans Parcels on Mandela Parkway, West Oakland



Source: Michael Pyatok

3 CalTrans parcels in West Oakland on Mandela Parkway where Pyatok and WSC have put together plans for “The Mandela Academy,” a complete community for teachers, working class families and unhoused neighbors.⁹⁸ They have support for the Academy from the local neighborhood group, West Oakland Neighbors. It would not be a great stretch to gain their support for a Sanctuary Community on the site in the interim.

The City of Oakland has apparently been in talks with Caltrans about leasing this parcel for a sanctioned homeless site, and Caltrans initially indicated willingness to consider it.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ [Homeless Oaklanders were tired of the housing crisis. So they built a ‘miracle’ village](#)

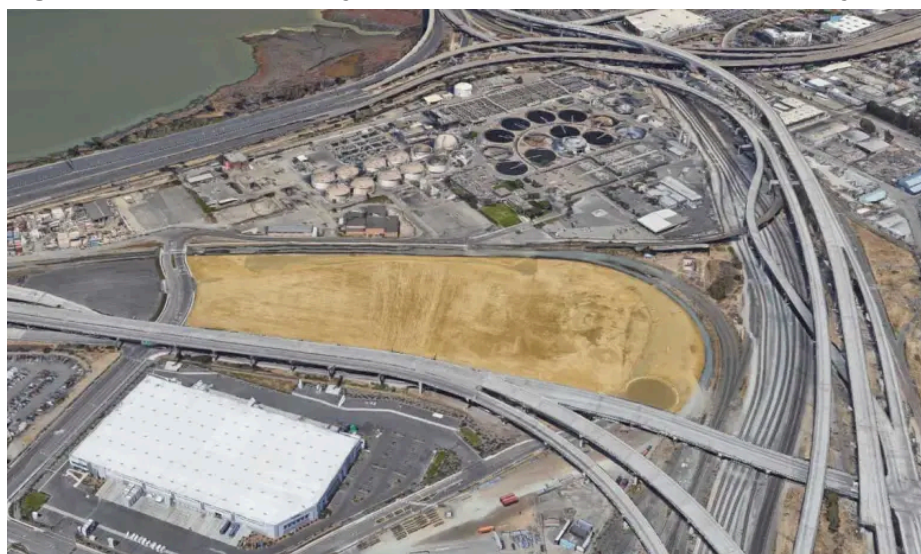
⁹⁷ [Our Solutions | Wood Street Commons](#)

⁹⁸ [Proposal for Development of Supportive Housing & Teacher Housing for 3 Caltrans Parcels on Mandela Parkway](#)

⁹⁹ [Wood Street residents fight on](#)

Notably, when unhoused residents occupied the site in 2022, Caltrans ultimately cleared them due primarily to lack of official authorization.¹⁰⁰ With City support and state cooperation, the 34th & Mandela yard could immediately become a Sanctuary Community. This is likely the most viable West Oakland location, situated across from the recently purchased Extended Stay Hotel that the City will be using for transitional housing for unsheltered people.

Figure 10. North Gateway Parcel at the Former Oakland Army Base



Source: Google Image

The North Gateway parcel on the former army base in West Oakland. Pyatok and WSC created plans for the New Horizons Community¹⁰¹ on this site with a version of The Academy, along with ‘student housing’ designed for the unhoused, affordable housing for low-income families and teacher housing. In 2022, Councilmember Carroll Fife proposed using an undeveloped 8-acre portion of the Army Base (known as the North Gateway parcel) to serve up to 300 people displaced from Wood Street and other locations. The City Council passed a resolution in October 2022 endorsing this idea, directing the City Administrator to open the site and collaborate with state/county to provide a more stable intervention.¹⁰² This suggests strong political support for using the Army Base as a Sanctioned Community.

Feasibility challenges exist; City staff noted that a deed restriction prohibits residential use of the Army Base land without a state waiver.¹⁰³ Additionally, environmental assessments found the 22-acre North Gateway area to be contaminated, making it unsafe without remediation. Despite these hurdles, the Council’s action indicates momentum – the City has filed for a waiver to allow emergency shelter use.¹⁰⁴ If granted and if basic mitigation is done, the

¹⁰⁰ [Newly formed Oakland homeless encampment on Caltrans property cleared | KTVU FOX 2](#)

¹⁰¹ [New Horizons Community Plans | Proposal for a New West Oakland Neighborhood](#)

¹⁰² oakland.legistar.com

¹⁰³ [Oakland again eyes Army base for temporary housing of homeless residents | Courthouse News Service](#)

¹⁰⁴ [Housing Is A Human Right — Carroll for Council](#)

Army Base could host a series of Sanctuary Communities while working to implement longer term social housing and resource center plans laid out by Pyatok and WSC.

Figure 11. 16th Street Station Rendering from WSC



Source: Michael Pyatok

16th Street Station. This site is presently vacant, but a private developer wants to develop market rate housing around it. The Oakland Heritage Alliance does not like that proposal and has worked with Pyatok, WSC and the Homeless Advocates Working Group (HAWG) on a proposal for development of an education and residential program and restoration of the historical train station.¹⁰⁵ An interim Sanctuary Community (situated in the areas to be developed surrounding the station) could offer classes to the residents so that when reconstruction of the train station begins, some of them could get jobs on the work crews.

Coliseum Way/66th Avenue City Lot (Oakland Coliseum Parking): The Oakland Coliseum’s sprawling parking lots are publicly owned land and are increasingly underutilized. In late 2022, the City Council approved opening part of the Coliseum parking at 796 66th Avenue as a “safe parking” site for RV dwellers, a program that now provides sanitation, security, and services for 30–50 vehicles.¹⁰⁶ This city-owned lot is expansive enough to accommodate well over 100 people, has immediate BART and bus access, and has no conflicting use. The City’s current safe RV parking at this site (with wash stations, trash service, and 24-hour security) shows the concept in action. Officials have noted that providing a designated area here improves safety

¹⁰⁵ [pdf The Academy at 16th Street Station 11.01.24 REDUCED.pdf](#)

¹⁰⁶ [City Council sets stage for new supportive housing. RV park in 2022](#)

and sanitation for both the unhoused and the surrounding community.¹⁰⁷ As a Sanctuary Community, a section of the Coliseum lot could host tents, tiny shelters, or additional vehicles with City support. Because this land is already owned by Oakland and partly in use for homeless interventions, expanding its utilization is straightforward.

Next Steps...

Oakland should take immediate steps to shift away from costly and harmful encampment closures and toward supportive, community-based responses to unsheltered homelessness. The first and most essential action is for the City to formally commit to ending the practice of forcibly displacing unsheltered people when no viable shelter or housing is available. This commitment requires no financial investment but would immediately reduce harm and improve public trust. City leadership should take the following next steps:

- 1. Establish a Moratorium on Encampment Sweeps**
Suspend all involuntary encampment closures until appropriate, evidence-based interventions are developed in partnership with unsheltered residents, frontline workers, and advocates. These interventions must ensure the safety and dignity of a highly vulnerable population, disproportionately made up of people of color and other marginalized groups. This approach aligns with the City's stated equity goals and reduces the risk of legal and ethical consequences from current harmful practices.
- 2. Engage Impacted Communities in Policy Development**
Formalize an ongoing participatory process with unsheltered residents, frontline workers, and advocacy organizations to make necessary changes to the Encampment Management Policy and co-create long-term solutions that address the root causes of homelessness, not just its visible symptoms.
- 3. Support a Pilot Sanctuary Community**
Partner with Wood Street Commons and the Advisory Council to pilot a Sanctuary Community on City-owned or publicly controlled land. Provide essential services such as sanitation, water access, and trash collection. Redirect funds from sweeps to support the infrastructure and services needed. The pilot should be resident-governed and designed in collaboration with impacted people, community organizations, and City departments.

By committing to these next steps, Oakland can begin to shift from reactive displacement toward real, community-driven solutions that uphold the dignity, health, and safety of all residents.

¹⁰⁷ [First Parking Site for People Living in RVs Opens in Oakland in Bid to Ease Housing Crisis | KQED](#)

Appendix A: Key Takeaways

Centering Racial Equity, Key Findings:

Black and Indigenous people are unhoused at rates 2 and 3 times higher than they are present in the general population.

Racial disparities in Oakland's unhoused population are linked to centuries of racist policies of land theft, displacement and economic exclusion.

People who are veterans, disabled and LGBTQ+ are overrepresented among Oakland's unhoused population.

Oakland's homelessness policy disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities, creating both a critical opportunity to advance equity and a significant risk of causing discriminatory harm.

Encampment Closures Do Not Eliminate Encampments, Key Findings:

Despite increasing rates of encampment closures, Oakland is not successfully reducing numbers of encampments or people living unsheltered.

Unsheltered people are being displaced multiple times.

The EMT is conducting multiple "reoccurrence" operations.

Encampment closures are not an effective intervention to reduce encampments or get people off the streets.

Encampment Management Lacks Accountability and Transparency, Key Findings:

The EMT does not make public any data on outcomes for unsheltered people. Their public updates measure success by how many operations were completed.

Unsheltered people and their advocates dispute the accuracy of claims made by the EMT regarding the impact and outcomes of encampment closures.

Oakland's report to the state regarding the MLK sweep contradicts EMT claims about encampment size and shelter provision.

City policies do not reflect the research showing that sweeps make unsheltered homelessness worse and more dangerous.

Input from impacted people and their advocates is needed to understand the true impact of EMT operations and outcomes for people displaced by sweeps.

Shelters are Unavailable, Inadequate or Inaccessible, Key Findings:

Oakland has shelter beds for only 15% of the unsheltered population, leaving the majority without shelter during closures.

The beds most available are unstable, inaccessible or unacceptable to most people.

The EMT is incapable of offering shelter to most people during encampment closures, contradicting claims on HHAP grant applications.

People displaced during sweeps are sometimes incorrectly offered shelter that is not actually available.

Congregate shelters offer little more than a temporary stay (some as few as 1 night).

Unsheltered people are most commonly exited back to the street from congregate and cabin shelter alike.

Many unsheltered people have had traumatic experiences in shelters and conditions can be dangerous, unhygienic and degrading.

Sweeps Particularly Harm Elders and People with Disabilities, Key Findings:

During sweeps, ADA accommodations are often not provided, leaving elderly and disabled residents without necessary support.

Congregate shelters frequently lack adequate accommodations for disabled or immunocompromised people, forcing them back onto the streets.

The trauma of repeated displacement exacerbates mental health symptoms, leading to involuntary psychiatric holds and increased criminalization.

Sweeps Sever Connections to Care Providers, Key Findings:

Care providers build trust with unsheltered residents over months or years to connect them with housing, benefits, and treatment programs. Sweeps disrupt these relationships, causing clients to lose contact with essential services and sabotaging ongoing care plans.

Interruptions in care from sweeps can have severe health consequences for those managing chronic conditions like HIV, hepatitis C, and untreated wounds.

Lost connections to care result in increased reliance on emergency services, escalating costs for the City.

Repeated displacement destroys trust in outreach workers and service providers making future engagement less likely and further entrenching people in homelessness.

Sweeps Cause Loss of Property Needed for Housing and Survival, Key Findings:

During sweeps, vital property is lost or destroyed despite EMP storage requirements.

Loss of medications and medical devices creates life-threatening risks.

Loss of vital records creates barriers to exiting homelessness.

Sweeps Increase Mortality of Unsheltered People, Key Findings:

Sweeps directly contribute to the increased mortality rates of unsheltered people.

The median age of death for unhoused people in Alameda County is 23 years younger than the general population.

Exposure deaths are 75.5 times higher among unhoused people, making the loss of tents, RVs, vehicles and makeshift shelter that often happens during sweeps especially dangerous.

Displacing unsheltered people without providing improved and appropriate living conditions is life threatening.

Curbside Communities Help People Survive, Key Findings:

Unsheltered communities facilitate peer support that can help people cope with trauma, addiction, discrimination and social exclusion/stigma.

Peer communities create a sense of safety and routine vital for those with PTSD and other mental health conditions.

Unsheltered communities provide caregiving and mutual aid that are scarce through conventional services, especially for elders, people with disabilities, and those with chronic health conditions.

Dismantling communities that provide care and services to people with significant emotional and physical health needs would also remove that care.

Financial Costs, Key Takeaways:

Rough estimates from a 2021 EMT audit put the cost of closures at \$1,464/hr.

The EMT does not operate with a formal budget, making the true cost of their operations impossible to quantify.

From 2018–2020, the average cost per EMT operation was \$25,000.

Appendix B: WSC Pilot Program Proposal

The Wood Street Commons

4799 Shattuck Ave.
Oakland, CA 94608
917-301-4149

Pilot Program Proposal

January 28th, 2025

The homelessness crisis in Oakland demands an immediate and compassionate response. To address this urgent issue, we propose a pilot program focused on establishing sanctuary communities. These communities will offer safe and supportive living spaces for unhoused individuals, prioritizing resident leadership and autonomy.

Phased Timeline

1. **Develop Advisory Council:** Assemble a council of community organizations and people with lived experience of homelessness to guide the program
2. **Identify Land:** Identify vacant land suitable for the pilot program
3. **Neighbor Outreach:** Engage with surrounding neighbors to address concerns and build support
4. **Land Development:** Develop basic infrastructure and utilities for the location
5. **Resident Outreach:** Conduct targeted outreach to nearby unhoused communities
6. **Develop Resident Council:** Facilitate the formation of a resident council to manage community
7. **Arrange Services:** Secure commitments from healthcare, social services, and essential providers
8. **Move-in:** Welcome residents and initiate community self-governance

Infrastructure Needs

The selected site will be developed to meet the following infrastructure needs:

- Access to electricity, plumbing, and sanitation will be established
- A communal kitchen/ dining area will be created to facilitate shared meals and gatherings
- Designated community spaces will be available for meetings, events, and social activities
- A community garden so residents can connect with nature, grow food, and learn ecological skills
- A classroom space will be established to host educational programming and workshops
- A social service office to provide a dedicated space for residents to access support and resources

Resident Outreach and Enrollment

To ensure accessibility and avoid harmful practices, outreach, and enrollment will follow these guidelines:

- A completely voluntary enrollment process will be used, entirely separate from any city-led encampment management efforts.
- Housing groups will be developed from existing communities to maintain support networks
- New residents will be welcomed as valued members of a community, fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

Resident Governance Structure

The Governance Structure of the Sanctuary Communities will have three parts:

- **Resident Council Roles:**
 - Developing and enforcing community agreements with the possibility of appeal to advisory council or other independent third party
 - Ensuring fairness in the navigation of interpersonal conflicts, with mediation by independent third-party restorative justice facilitators when appropriate
 - Developing enrollment criteria/determining barriers to entry, welcoming new residents
 - Managing onsite operations
 - Meeting general operating costs (subsidized through GA, SSI, or other subsidies)
 - Receive income to provide security, cleanup, and beautification of the sanctuary
 - Celebrate birthdays
- **Advisory Council Roles:**
 - Outreach to housed neighbors to hear and address concerns
 - Host public events to facilitate a sense of community
 - Facilitate life coaching
 - Facilitate conflict resolution
 - Facilitating onsite programming
 - Organizing donation drives and distribution
 - Providing meals
- **Role of Partner Organization**
 - Management of contracts with service providers, construction/tiny home contractors/city
 - Developing utility infrastructure
 - Securing and managing funds
 - Accounting

- Tracking enrollment and exit data
- Other administrative tasks
- Use of stipends or a time bank system to incentivize contributions to communal labor

Supporting Organizations and Consultants

A diverse range of organizations and individuals will contribute to the success of this pilot program:

- Trash Services:
 - Green Mary
 - Community Ready Corps
- Harm Reduction:
 - Punks With Lunch
- Food Program:
 - Essential Food and Medicine
 - Chefs to End Hunger
 - Food Not Bombs
 - Alameda Food Bank
 - Good Eggs
 - Community Free Kitchen
 - Emeryville Citizens Assistance Program
- Medical Services:
 - Lifelong Medical
 - Roots Community Clinic
 - Alameda Healthcare for the Homeless
 - Berkeley Free Community Health Clinic
- Mental Health Services:
 - MH First Aid
 - MACRO
 - Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth
- Laundry Services:
 - Laundry Love
- Educational Opportunities:
 - Peralta Community College District
 - Laney College Teach-In Committee
- Community Building
 - Poor People’s Campaign
 - Anti-Police Terror Project
 - Care 4 Community
 - Community Ready Corps
 - Wood Street Commons
- Advocacy Opportunities:
 - Wood Street Commons
 - Love and Justice in the Streets
 - Western Regional Advocacy Project
 - Oakland Homeless Union
 - Poor Magazine
 - Where Do We Go?
- Technology Access:
 - Homefulness
- Legal Services:
 - Homeless Action Center
 - East Bay Community Law Center
 - Sustainable Economies Law Center
- Housing/ Benefits Navigation:
 - Homeless Action Center
- Permanent Housing Coalition:
 - Oakland Community Land Trust
 - EBPREC
 - Mom’s 4 Housing
 - Wood Street Commons
 - ADU Premium
 - Youth Spirit Artworks
 - Next Egg
 - Pyatok Architecture

Onsite Services and Programming

Comprehensive support services will be offered to address the diverse needs of residents:

- Healthcare services will encompass physical, mental, and addiction recovery support
- Culturally appropriate healing modalities to respect diverse cultural backgrounds
- Social services, including assistance with document preparation and housing navigation
- Education and job training programs will be offered to enhance residents' skills and opportunities
- Job opportunities within the community will be created to stabilize the community financially
- Gardening and land restoration initiatives will foster a meaningful connection to the environment
- An RV repair program will offer valuable training and support residents who live in vehicles
- 24-hour crisis hotline will ensure that residents have access to immediate support when needed
- Outdoor activities, celebrations, and pet care will foster a sense of community well-being
- Mentorship and life coaching programs will provide individualized support and guidance

Educational Programming

Educational opportunities will be offered to empower residents and expand their knowledge and skills:

- Political education workshops will promote civic engagement and awareness of residents' rights
- Formal education opportunities will be facilitated through partnerships with the Peralta Colleges

Tracking Success

The success of this program will be evaluated through both quantitative and qualitative measures:

- Resident well-being, satisfaction, and community stability will be key indicators of success
- Data on health outcomes, employment rates, and other relevant measures will be collected to track progress and inform future program development.

Conclusion

The sanctuary community model represents a paradigm shift in addressing homelessness, moving from temporary fixes to a more holistic and sustainable approach. By prioritizing resident leadership, providing dignified housing options, and offering comprehensive support services, this pilot program has the potential to create a transformative model for addressing homelessness in Oakland and beyond. We urge the Oakland Housing and Community Development Office to consider this proposal as a critical step toward a more just and compassionate response to the homelessness crisis.

Appendix C: Case Studies

Pu‘uhonua O Wai‘anae (POW)

Overview

Pu‘uhonua O Wai‘anae (POW) is a self-governed community of unhoused people on the west side of O‘ahu, Hawai‘i. Rooted in the Hawaiian concept of "pu‘uhonua," meaning "place of refuge," POW is home to keiki (children), kūpuna (elders), working families and a host of others, two thirds of whom are Native Hawaiian. POW is built on an ethic of kuleana (responsibility) and aloha, a word that embodies kindness, unity, agreeability, humility and patience and has much deeper indefinable cultural significance. Service and care are a part of daily life and a foundation for the community’s success. POW is connected with other unhoused communities and regularly offers support, whether that is physical labor, planning and community building or resource sharing. POW’s food pantry is open to anyone who needs it and residents do outreach weekly to share food and supplies. They also serve the larger community providing regular beach and park cleanups and other services that they may be called upon to provide by local organizations they have relationships with.

Residents use and help to maintain the bathrooms and showers at the boat harbor parking lot. They take these privileges seriously and do not shower until after 4:30 giving boaters primary access whenever they need it. Living areas are divided into six sections arranged according to need, with kūpuna (elders), people with accessibility needs and families with young children placed closest to the water source. As you enter the camp, you will see a communal outdoor kitchen, a free food pantry with an assortment of food and hygiene products, a donations tent with free clothing and furniture, and a tent with couches where older kids can hang out.

There is no time limit to how long residents can reside at POW. Many end up at POW because they could not find suitable housing before their time was up at a temporary facility. POW is a place of healing and there is no timeline for when or how that happens. The community is a healing incubator, a model of peer support used in 12 step groups and mental health treatment all over the world. People regularly exit POW to long term housing at rates much higher than other interim shelters, and their time at POW provides them the growth and connection to be successful when they leave.

Key Takeaways

Self-Governance and Responsibility:

Empower residents to manage their own community through shared responsibility and leadership.

Culturally-Informed Values:

Ground the community in locally relevant cultural values (e.g., kuleana—responsibility, aloha—kindness, unity, humility).

No Residency Time Limits:

Allow residents to stay without strict timelines, supporting meaningful healing and sustainable transitions to permanent housing.

Mutual Aid and Community Service:

Foster a culture of regular outreach and mutual support, including offering services (food pantry, cleanups, resource sharing) to both unhoused peers and the broader local community.

Intentional Community Design:

Strategically organize living spaces to prioritize vulnerable residents (elders, disabled, families with young children) near essential resources.

Peer Support and Healing Focus:

Use peer-based healing and support models to nurture personal growth and prepare residents for successful long-term housing outcomes.

Governance/Day to Day Function

As the community, referred to by residents as “The Village” grew, they developed a governance structure based on mutual aid and Indigenous values, with residents taking on roles in security, food distribution, and leadership. The Village Council holds leadership roles in the community’s governing body and ensures that people are cared for, community rules are honored and the community structure and function are maintained. Despite repeated eviction threats, POW has remained intact due to their ability to govern themselves and adapt as a community to the challenges they face. During early periods of expansion, neighbors complained about residents’ behavior. They reported theft and people walking through the high school with beer bottles. Piles of garbage were accumulating. POW was told by the State Department of Land and Natural Resources, who owned the harbor parcel, that they had 60 days to get out.

This threat of eviction was a turning point and the point at which the POW village began to organize itself and develop their shared method of self-governance. They had gotten too big to function otherwise. They began to hold monthly meetings with business owners and community members to address any issues they were having with POW. They brought in portable dumpsters and residents banded together to clean out the large piles of trash that had accumulated from both residents and illegal dumping.

POW has 6 area “Captains” to oversee the three sections of the camp (today the camp has expanded to 6 sections). Most of the camp’s early leadership were women. Today, roles have expanded to include security, bathroom attendants, childcare coordinators, groundskeeping, maintenance and more. The Village Council and Leaders manage daily operation of the village and the “programs” of POW, such as neighborhood watch, houseless outreach, park beautification, coastal cleanups, and other community service projects. Village

leaders serve as touch points for social services, law enforcement and other service providers, streamlining connections and building relationships that make everyone's job easier.

Key Takeaways

Clear Governance Structure and Leadership

- Establish an organized, inclusive leadership structure (e.g., Village Council and area captains).
- Clearly define roles such as security, food distribution, childcare, maintenance, and outreach.

Mutual Aid and Shared Responsibility

- Foster community self-reliance through mutual aid practices and collective action.
- Promote a culture of mutual accountability and cooperation among residents.

Community Engagement and Communication

- Maintain regular communication and collaboration with neighbors, local businesses, and community stakeholders to address conflicts proactively.
- Conduct regular meetings with external community members to ensure ongoing dialogue and problem-solving.

Adaptability and Responsiveness

- Quickly adapt to challenges (e.g., eviction threats or neighbor complaints) by organizing responsive action, such as cleanup initiatives and improved community behavior.

Diverse Leadership Roles

- Encourage leadership from diverse demographics (early leaders were women) to reflect and respond to the varied needs within the community.

Establish Clear Rules and Norms

- Create and enforce community standards to maintain order and minimize conflicts, which builds trust both within and outside the community.

Regular Maintenance and Community Pride

- Implement routine upkeep and beautification programs to foster a sense of ownership and pride among residents, reducing negative external perceptions.

Effective Liaison with External Services

- Appoint leaders who act as key contacts between the unsheltered community and external services, such as social services and law enforcement, facilitating smoother interactions and effective problem resolution.

Community-Oriented Service Projects

- Engage residents in community service projects (e.g., neighborhood watch, coastal cleanups), fostering positive external relationships and enhancing the community's legitimacy.



Photo and quote: [POW Facebook](#)

“Murray” is a member of Pu'uuhonua o Wai'anae's Bathroom Brigade, but also is the leader of his section, and helps oversee security and other village activities. When asked what he loves about the village, he says, “A lot of houseless people will tell you, “I found more love on the street than I did in my own home. People on the street tend to give more love.” Being a leader in the village is a big kuleana, but Murray appreciates the opportunity. “I like being part of something bigger than any one of us. And I get to meet good people. I'm grateful for all the good people I met.”



Safety Coordinator, Kalala Kalua, “The feeling of family that you get here, you won't get it out in the community. If I'm feeling down, they know. They would come and try to lift me up and encourage me to do positive things, and vice versa. I believe that Aloha does live here.”

Photo and quote: [POW Facebook](#)



A summer program for POW youth and friends is envisioned and staffed daily by a mix of volunteers who are residents and also friends of the village.

Photo: [POW Facebook](#)

Benefits

By conservative estimates, it would cost over \$7 million to build a congregate shelter of comparable capacity and millions per year to operate it, a costly prospect for a shelter model that is universally plagued with problems and offers poor rates of transition to long term housing. In one 6 month period, the village helped more than 20 families get into long term housing.

Intergenerational support and stability allow people to better provide for themselves and their children, increasing positive economic and educational outcomes. Adults in the village provide shared caretaking for the 40-50 children who live there. Because the village provides a safe and stable place to live with reliable childcare, adults can go to work and kids can attend school without having to switch schools every time they are swept or move between shelters. In 2017, one village resident graduated Summa Cum Laude from Waianae High School.

Residents enjoy significant health benefits from the stability of their community and interconnected relationships. They support each other to access regular healthcare, maintain prescriptions and tend to daily health care and accessibility needs. This drastically reduces the need for costly visits to the ER. Ambulances to the ER are called to the village fewer than 12 times a year. A 2023 study in the Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved found that on average, a person who is unhoused visits the ER an average of 6 times per year.¹⁰⁸ A 2024 CDC report found that, on average, unhoused people arrive to the Emergency Room by ambulance 41.8% of the time. Given these averages, the POW community has eliminated hundreds of ambulance rides and ER visits that cost thousands of dollars for uninsured patients, saving, by their estimates, up to 2.4 million in health care costs.

Key Takeaways

Cost-Effectiveness and Responsive to Resident Need

POW costs significantly less than conventional congregate shelters, both in terms of construction and ongoing operations and is responsive to the needs of the community in ways that congregate shelters notoriously are not.

High Transition Rates to Stable Housing

Self-governed communities like POW have demonstrated effectiveness in transitioning families to stable, long-term housing (e.g., 20 families within a six-month period).

Intergenerational Stability and Economic Opportunities

The stability provided by self-governance and community support systems enables adults to hold steady employment and children to attend school consistently, leading to improved educational and economic outcomes.

Positive Health Outcomes and Accessibility

¹⁰⁸ See Table 1, Associations between different types of housing insecurity and future emergency department use among a cohort of emergency department patients. (2023) Routhier, Mijanovich, et. al. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/associations-between-different-types-housing/docview/2864248249/se-2?accountid=14496>

Residents benefit significantly from community stability, mutual aid, and interconnected social networks, improving access to healthcare and reducing reliance on emergency services.

Challenges

The environment and weather provide unique challenges to residents living in the POW village. Wind and dry weather create dust storms that require facial coverings not to choke. Heavy rains can overwhelm tents and tarps, flooding tents and community structures. Rain also makes the ground muddy and difficult to navigate. Oftentimes, after rains, poisonous scorpions will drop down from the trees, leading residents to have to pull the stingers out to avoid serious injury that is more prone to infection simply from being more exposed to the elements.

The village is often blamed for crime, vandalism, and trash dumping in the area. Most neighbors don't realize that it is often housed people who are responsible, or other houseless people who have been forced into the area by "sweeps" in other places. Village leaders are often the ones who report crimes and help to identify perpetrators. There are a small minority of people, as in every community, who commit crime or use drugs. The village has a process for accountability and, if necessary, eviction.

Respecting the boaters who pay for the four water faucets out in the boat harbor parking lot means not showering until after 4:30 p.m. and giving boaters access to the faucets whenever they need it. This can be hard because the biggest daily necessity is water, which residents must haul from one of the faucets to their campsites.

POW's Future

Today, residents are entering phase two of a fundraising and development campaign to build permanent housing on 20 acres of private land they were able to purchase. In 2018, the State was planning to evict the village to build a school on the land. Rather than fight the creation of a school, which they supported, Twinkle, the Village Council, and supporters from Hawai'i and beyond rallied to stop the sweep so that POW could plan a transition to a permanent location. Two years later, after a whirlwind of fundraising, they purchased 20 acres 2.5 miles from the boat harbor that will be the site of the Pu'uohonua O Wai'anae Farm Village.

The Pu'uohonua team broke ground in October of 2022, and is now gearing up for construction on what will eventually be around 90 A-frame duplex homes (a total of 180 housing units that can house up to 300 people). Structures at the Farm include communal bathrooms and kitchens, and a gathering hall or Hale Hālāwai surrounded by clusters of duplex homes. Half of the site will be dedicated to farming of 'ulu (breadfruit), mai'a (banana), papaya, mango, and other crops to feed people of the village and others across the Wai'anae Coast. Many design decisions still need to be made.

Building the homes has been a collaborative effort, with a combination of volunteer work from Pu‘uhonua residents, professional contractors, pro bono work and donated materials from local companies. The Village Council is driving the design and planning for the POW Farm with the help of their village nonprofit, Dynamic Community Solutions, and Hui Aloha, a volunteer network that works to grow Aloha with unhoused people across the islands. Residents own the land collectively, through Dynamic Community Solutions, which Borge and several long-time residents founded in 2017. In much the way that community land trusts enable groups of neighbors to exert control over speculative development and build collective wealth, Pu‘uhonua O Wai‘anae Farm Village will be governed by the villagers, with costs and benefits shared.

SHARE/WHEEL

Overview

SHARE (Seattle Housing and Resource Effort) is co-ed and WHEEL (Women’s Housing, Equality and Enhancement League) is women only; together, they are a network of housing and shelter organizations managed by unhoused participants in King County, Washington. SHARE/WHEEL are self-managed, democratic, grassroots organizations that began with the launch of their first Tent City in 1990. SHARE/WHEEL is a self-help group, relying on peer support and accountability to function, but also to build power and claim dignity so often denied them in homeless services and shelter systems.

Origin

SHARE/WHEEL began during the Goodwill Games. A group of unhoused organizers, led by Scott Morrow wanted a safe place to be during the high profile event and got a permit to have a big top tent where they organized activities and games to great success. The group continued to meet weekly on Saturdays, as they do to this day, for a “power lunch.” At these meetings they planned to launch a camp they would use to advocate for the City to give them an indoor space that they could run themselves. This was the first Tent City, set up on public land without permission. The Mayor at that time negotiated with them and agreed to provide a public building they could use for a winter shelter. The group was up to 180 people at that point, too many for the building, and they connected with a church that agreed to host the overflow in a sanctioned Tent City on their grounds. Thus the network of indoor shelter and Tent Cities was born.

Evolution

Over the years, SHARE/WHEEL expanded significantly, establishing indoor shelters, additional Tent Cities, and specialized programs like SHARE2 (housing-for-work) and storage lockers. Today they operate 11 indoor shelters and two rotating Tent Cities, supporting approximately 450 people nightly. These communities remain self-governed, demonstrating a sustainable and empowering model for addressing homelessness. Their Tent Cities rotate locations across various host sites like churches, universities, and private lands with permission.

Through activism, community engagement, and legal advocacy, they successfully passed an ordinance in 2015 recognizing the legitimacy of Tent Cities by establishing a permitting process to set up on public land or private property. They often set up at Churches as well, which do not require permits because of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, a Bush era Federal Act that gives churches a lot more freedom to use their land as they see fit to realize their mission.

Most of the indoor, self governed shelters are in churches, and some have posted indoor, democratically organized, self managed shelters for three decades. Others will reclaim their space for other purposes and SHARE will move. SHARE has a simple template. They require that people to agree to work together, be sober, do chores, elect their own leaders and follow the rules. The WHEEL template is a little different. They employ outside staff and have a lower barrier to entry because they are harm reduction. WHEEL now has 3 facilities that serve 111 women.

Initially, the City of Seattle was very resistant to Tent Cities, which are largely self-funded through donations and occasional grants. Since the right to have permitted camps was won in court, there are several Tent Cities, shelters and tiny house villages that are self-governed. Two years after permitted camps were approved by City Council, Mayor Murphy commissioned a Permitted Encampment Evaluation to determine if the City's new investment in case management and services were warranted. They looked at three model programs, one of which was SHARE.

Key Takeaways

Scalable, Self-Governed Model:

SHARE/WHEEL now supports around 450 people nightly across 11 indoor shelters and two rotating Tent Cities, maintaining a consistent structure of resident self-governance and peer accountability.

Legal Recognition and Flexibility:

Through advocacy, SHARE helped pass a 2015 ordinance creating a permitting process for Tent Cities on public or private land, while churches can host encampments without permits under federal religious land-use protections.

Low-Cost, Community-Based Solutions:

Most sites are hosted in churches or on donated land, relying largely on donations and volunteerism rather than public funding—demonstrating a low-cost, community-driven approach.

Diverse Program Models:

SHARE shelters require sobriety and shared responsibilities, while WHEEL facilities use a harm reduction model with outside staff, offering flexible pathways for different populations,

including 111 women served across three WHEEL shelters.

Institutional Shift:

Initial resistance from the City of Seattle eventually gave way to formal support, including a City Council-approved permitting system and a commissioned evaluation of permitted encampments as legitimate housing alternatives.

Key Findings from Seattle’s Permitted Encampment Evaluation:

- The City permitted encampments met and exceeded the contracted performance measures for 2016 of at least 125 unhoused individuals and families being able to meet their emergency or immediate shelter needs (467 people were served) and at least 45 individuals or families entering transitional or permanent housing (85 moved into permanent housing and 41 entered transitional housing.¹⁰⁹) Below you can see a chart of how exit rates from the permitted encampments compare to traditional shelters.

Exit Destination	Encampments		Enhanced Shelter	
	Total Exit		Total Exit	
Permanent Housing	85	26%	207	18%
Place Not Fit for Human Habitation	43	13%	53	5%
Transitional Housing	41	13%	87	8%
Shelter / Safe Haven	17	5%	175	15%
Institution	7	2%	30	3%
Other Temporary Situation	5	2%	75	7%
Deceased	0	0%	3	0%
Missing/ Refused	129	39%	504	44%
Total exited	327		1134	

- The model is successfully serving people who have been living outside in greenbelts, on the streets, in cars and in hazardous situations.
- Overall, the neighboring communities have responded positively and, there is no significant increase in crime when the permitted encampment moves in.
- The encampment self-managed governance structure offers residents a way to positively contribute to day-to-day operations and community engagement efforts while building individual confidence and leadership skills.
- The success of the first two years of the permitted encampment validates the value of adding case management and services to the self-managed encampments.

Governance & Day-to-Day Function

¹⁰⁹ [Permitted Encampment Evaluation June 28, 2017](#) pg. 7

Tent Cities and SHARE/WHEEL shelters are entirely managed by the residents themselves. Members elect committees and leaders through regular meetings using democratic processes (motions, voting, and collective decision-making). Weekly community meetings facilitate all decisions and oversight, and elected representatives serve on executive committees or boards. They provide essentials such as portable restrooms, hygiene stations, security patrols, food calendars, transportation assistance, and storage solutions. Community duties are shared responsibilities among residents, reinforcing accountability and engagement. SHARE finds that 100 residents seems to work best for a democratic, self-managed camp. It's enough people to do all the shifts in the work. It's not so big that it becomes inhumane and unmanageable.

Residents work to build and maintain positive relationships with host communities through outreach, volunteering, and cooperative projects. There are strict rules against littering in the camp or the surrounding neighborhood and residents conduct regular patrols to monitor adjacent streets and sidewalks to ensure they are kept clean and safe. This contributes to the safety of the community as a whole and there are never issues of increased crime around tent cities.

Camps maintain open relationships with the Police and Fire Departments who get to know the residents and the routines of the camp. Security for the most part is successfully handled internally. If a resident is required to leave the camp, they are given a bus pass and escorted to bus transportation unless that is not available, in which case other arrangements are made for taxi services, etc. If any individual poses a physical threat, the camp will contact the Police Department. Open fires are not allowed at camps and fire extinguishers are posted according to directives of the local fire departments.

Tent Cities make engagement with social services and resource providers convenient and nurses with Health Care for the Homeless provide onsite visits, first aid kits, and other resources and referrals.

Key Takeaways

Self-Governed, Scalable Shelters Work: SHARE/WHEEL provides nightly shelter to 450 people through a replicable, resident-led model that emphasizes accountability and democratic governance.

Legal and Policy Wins Enable Growth: SHARE's advocacy led to a city ordinance and federal protections that legitimize and expand the reach of Tent Cities and church-hosted shelters.

Sustainable with Minimal Public Funding: These programs operate largely on donations and community partnerships, proving that low-cost, non-governmental models can provide stable shelter.

Flexible Models for Different Needs: SHARE offers structured, sobriety-based shelters, while WHEEL provides harm reduction spaces with outside staff—supporting diverse populations, including women-only facilities.

From Resistance to Recognition: Despite early pushback, Seattle now formally permits and evaluates self-governed encampments as viable components of the city's homelessness response.

Costs

Cost of operation for the Tent Cities is an ongoing struggle because they are largely self-funded through donations. The camps provide portable toilets (honey buckets) and hand washing stations which can cost up to \$5000/month for a 100 person camp. The camp provides phone service, trash removal, dumpster service and recycling. They also provide bus tickets so that people can get back and forth to their work and appointments. The Tent Cities pay a single staff organizer who works with both camps. They also supply food, cleaning supplies, hygiene materials and other day to day items.

Today, they get about \$80,000 a year from the City for both camps and a small amount from FEMA through their emergency shelter program, but they still must compensate with donations and the occasional grant.

SHARE/WHEEL's Influence on Policies/Laws

- SHARE/WHEEL successfully fought for legal acceptance of Tent Cities through direct action, negotiation, and lawsuits. A notable outcome was the 2002 Consent Decree in Seattle permitting Tent City 3, setting a critical legal precedent for other encampments.
- Tent Cities hosted by religious institutions benefit from constitutional protections under the First Amendment and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), limiting bureaucratic restrictions.
- SHARE/WHEEL opposed and reached mediated settlements on invasive tracking programs like Safe Harbors, emphasizing residents' privacy rights and autonomy.