

## 1 **Chronic homelessness looks different in every community**

Chronic homelessness and the factors that contribute to it may not look the same everywhere. Each city, town, or county has its own housing market, service system, and legal environment. Understanding local conditions is the first step to an effective response.

## 2 **A small group accounts for a large share of police contacts**

A relatively small number of people who are chronically homeless—especially those who live unsheltered—account for a large share of calls for service, repeat police contacts, and use of public systems. Focusing attention on this group is critical to reducing strain on police time and resources.

## 3 **Partnerships are essential to a strong response**

Chronic homelessness is driven mainly by a lack of affordable housing, untreated physical and behavioral health needs, and weak social safety nets. Police are often the most visible responders, but they cannot solve these root causes through enforcement alone.

It is important for law enforcement agencies to know which government agencies, service providers, and community organizations are involved in the homelessness response in their area. Agencies should also understand what partnerships or coordinated groups already exist and how police can work with them.

## 4 **Law Enforcement should be part of the response—but not lead it**

Traditional enforcement-based approaches may reduce the visibility of people experiencing chronic homelessness in the short term. However, these approaches often increase long-term costs by cycling individuals through jails, hospitals, and courts without addressing their underlying needs.

Officers play an important role, but they are most effective when they support and partner with housing, health, and service systems rather than acting as the primary response.

## 5 **Success requires clear goals and measurement**

To understand whether a homelessness response is working, agencies must clearly define their goals. Measures of success may include referrals to services, reductions in repeat contacts, changes in emergency system use, victimization reporting, and levels of community trust. These measures should be tracked over time and used to adjust strategies as needed.

## 6 **Legal knowledge must guide all responses**

Any law enforcement response to homelessness must be informed by the current legal landscape. Even when enforcement is legally allowed, agencies should consider constitutional risk, public trust, and long-term problem-solving outcomes. Enforcement should be used carefully and selectively. Whenever possible, agencies should prioritize warm handoffs to services, transportation to appointments or shelters, and relationship-building that reduces harm and repeat contacts.

## 7 **Training is key to supporting officers' responses**

Responding to homelessness requires specific knowledge, judgment, and skill—just like any specialized area of policing. Officers and specialized teams should be selected and trained accordingly.

## 1 Examine your local context

Identify what chronic homelessness looks like in your jurisdiction. Review available data to understand the scope and nature of the problem, including police data and information from local partners.

## 2 Identify key partners

Determine which agencies, organizations, and community groups have a role in responding to homelessness in your area. Learn what partnerships or coordinated efforts already exist and how your agency can support or join them.

## 3 Define your agency's goals

Clearly state what your agency is trying to achieve in its response to homelessness. Goals should guide decision-making, resource allocation, and evaluation.

## 4 Understand the legal environment

Review local laws and ordinances related to homelessness. Make sure leadership and officers are familiar with relevant state and federal legal standards that affect enforcement and response options.

## 5 Decide your response capacity

Determine the appropriate scale of your agency's response. This response may involve a single officer, a small team, or a dedicated unit. While specialized roles are important, all officers should receive basic training in responding to calls involving homelessness.

## 6 Plan for evaluation

Develop a plan to assess how well your agency's response is working. Use data to track progress toward goals and adjust over time.



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