



Making the Case:

An Equitable Response to Homeless Children and Families

We created the [Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response](#) to help policymakers address the public health implications of COVID-19, help contain the spread of the virus, and help communities quickly get back on track economically. The Framework provides a guide for communities to maximize their resources and use them wisely. It is the intention of the Framework partners that communities can apply the principles, strategies, and funding guidance to their work with all people experiencing homelessness. We recognize, however, that different subpopulations of people are impacted in different ways and particular attention must be paid to different risks and vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic – and those risks and vulnerabilities are greater for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people.

Today, we are urging policymakers to be sure that the unique needs of children and families are included in the efforts to address both the public health and economic crisis created by COVID-19. We have heard that many communities have not tailored their strategies for the unique needs and circumstances of families with children. Further, addressing highest needs first, advancing racial equity, and getting families to housing quickly are imperative.

Our Guiding Principles

Use funds strategically and wisely. Smart planning and execution will help more families with children while also helping communities emerge from the pandemic even stronger. Communities that use the framework will be more effective and cost-efficient.

Advance racial justice and equity. Both homelessness and the pandemic shine a light on racial and economic inequities in our nation so new funds should help eliminate disparities in communities – not exacerbate them.

Address the highest needs first. Children and families who are unsheltered or have family members who are pregnant, medically fragile, disabled, and extremely low income should be helped first. Start by addressing needs of families who are currently experiencing homelessness.

Grow partnerships. By reinvigorating and establishing cross-sector partnerships with a broad range of organizations, systems, and state/local agencies there will be more resources to reach deeper into impacted communities.

Get people into housing. The best health intervention for children and families is consistent access to safe, stable, and affordable housing. Stable housing is necessary for economic recovery and to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Act quickly. Business as usual will not work. We must act quickly in the context of the pandemic and the growing economic crisis.

Why should your community develop and implement unique plans to address needs of children and families?

- Too often, families with children who are unsheltered living in cars and tents are invisible to policymakers. Widening community connections to identify these children and families who are unsheltered and helping them move to healthier settings is critical. This should be the top priority for policymakers.
- The [CDC](#) has advised that pregnant women are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19 and pregnant women who contract COVID-19 are increased risk for adverse outcomes, such as preterm birth. A group of pediatricians called out the dual impacts of homelessness and COVID-19 on child health.
- Separate accommodations for each family are particularly critical for young children (and children with special needs) who may not understand the need or lack the ability to engage in social distancing. Families with older adults, children/adults with respiratory illness, asthma, or those who are immunocompromised should also be prioritized for separate accommodations.
- Many [experts](#) believe that domestic and interpersonal violence has been increasing during the pandemic and that victims have fewer options if they wish to escape their situation. Others are concerned that despite reduced reporting, there are likely increases in [child abuse](#) and neglect.
- The loss of access to full-time childcare and in-person school is negatively impacting children's social and cognitive development and parents' ability to maintain employment. Supporting online education with appropriate technology, internet access, and individual spaces to support remote learning in shelter settings is particularly challenging.
- Housing instability is associated with poor health for children and parents and increased risk of other hardships, such as food insecurity. In addition to perpetuating individual health disparities, housing instability balloons healthcare costs. Conversely, when children live in safe, stable, quality homes their family can afford they are better able to thrive, have better physical and mental health outcomes, are at a lower risk of hospitalization, and are less likely to experience economic hardship. Furthermore, stable housing reduces overall health care expenditures, increases the use of primary care services, and decreases emergency room visits.
- Without smart planning and appropriate levels of investment, the number of families who experience homelessness is likely to grow. COVID-related job losses are widening gender and racial disparities, especially for [single female heads of households](#). Similarly, gender and racial disparities occur in who is evicted, with [Black single female heads of household](#) experiencing very high rates of eviction. These same families were already at greatest risk of homelessness and experienced homelessness more frequently.



How should your community use the framework and equity-based decision making when developing and implementing plans to address needs of children and families?

HELP HOMELESS FAMILIES FIRST

- Include the families with children who experience homelessness in the design and planning for the COVID-19 response. Position customers of our homelessness assistance systems and programs as [decision-makers](#).
- Fund and support community-based organizations that are led by Black and other people of color that families trust to better serve and connect families to appropriate and responsive services.
- Ensure that no child or family is left unsheltered. Expand capacity for crisis housing and emergency shelter, especially non-congregate settings which can provide healthier settings and better accommodate the unique needs of families. Easy access to community and mainstream services and benefits should be provided along with ensuring all basic needs are adequately met.
- All families need emergency and permanent housing responses that allow the family to define who is family and not separated by gender, age, or family definitions that do not align with cultural norms of those being served. This is particularly true for Pacific Island and Native-Indigenous as well as LGBTQ families for whom restrictive definitions of who “counts” as family members may contribute to disparity in access and use of resources.
- Quick placement in housing will provide safety and stability to children and families. Partnering with public housing agencies, businesses, healthcare, and other community organizations will make these efforts more successful.
- Work with shelters to upgrade technology, internet access, and spaces to support online learning for children and job search for parents. Invest in additional onsite staff support to help all families be able to get these needs met.
- Coordination and communication with schools and the school system is essential as plans continually evolve. This [resource](#) has practical suggestions on how to support children and parents.

PREVENT FAMILIES FROM FALLING INTO HOMELESSNESS

- Many more people are losing their jobs and facing hardship due to COVID-19 than can be helped with the amount of assistance available. This loss of income places families at an increased risk of housing instability including homelessness, as they may fall behind on rent and become evicted. While current federal assistance is limited and inadequate, by committing to helping the people most at risk of homelessness, scarce resources will achieve better results.
- [Diversion](#) is a highly effective and cost-efficient way to help families avoid homelessness.

- Fund and support community-based organizations that are working in the neighborhoods with high rates of homelessness. Focus resources on organizations led by Black and other people of color that families trust to better serve and connect families to appropriate and responsive services.
- Mobilize mainstream services (e.g., agencies that administer TANF, provide behavioral health services, schools, child welfare) to identify families who are vulnerable to becoming homelessness and help them craft appropriate responses that prevent homelessness.
- Ensure eviction prevention programs are prioritizing the most highly impacted neighborhoods and the most vulnerable renters. These neighborhoods can be identified by taking into account historical inequities and divestment. This [tool](#) can help policymakers be more effective.
- Increase access to emergency rental assistance and support eviction moratoria until sufficient rental assistance is provided from resources outside of the homeless assistance system.
- By strengthening your public-private response to homelessness, your community will be safer and healthier for everyone.

The fundamental imperative

Do not waste this opportunity to save lives and make enduring improvements. The Framework will help you be more successful in making the wisest decisions with limited resources within a time-constrained environment. We will be issuing additional guidance about how to better serve children and families over the next few weeks to help you.



Listening to People with Lived Experience

The National Working Group on Historically Marginalized Communities partnered with the National Innovation Service (NIS) Center for Housing Justice to design a series of listening sessions with historically marginalized communities. This work aligns with the Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response. From these listening sessions, NIS produced the following series of population-specific briefs to summarize the ideas and recommendations of individuals from ten historically marginalized communities. Individual focus groups were held specifically for individuals who identify as Asian American; Black; Latinx; Native-Indigenous; Pacific Islander; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer (LGBQ); Trans; People Living with Disabilities; People with Incarceration Histories; and People Involved with Public Systems. The most commonly discussed issues across all ten communities emerged around four suggested actions that a local jurisdiction could take to create a more equitable response to homelessness, centering the priorities of those communities who are most marginalized. For more about this series, go [here](#).

Policy Shift 1

Implement a crisis response that ends the use of large congregate shelters and creates dignity-based, safe, temporary crisis options as a bridge to long-term housing.

Policy Shift 2

Build, support, and fund dignity-based services led by the communities most impacted by homelessness.

Policy Shift 3

Develop affordable housing in the most impacted communities and target housing and rental assistance to those most impacted by structural inequity.

Policy Shift 4

Divest from policing, remove police from the homelessness response system, and invest a portion of the funds in housing and services to communities most impacted by police brutality.

Additional Tools and Resources

Check out a comprehensive set of [Tools and Resources](#) that can aid efforts to implement the Framework available at housingequityframework.org. We encourage you to check there regularly for guidance regarding federal funding sources, for planning and operational guidance from federal and national organizations, and for state and local examples, tools, and resources.