

Camp Crisis Response in a Small-Medium Urban College Town

John Morris

**Advantage Behavioral Health Systems
Community Programs Team Lead**



Introduction

Home: Athens, GA

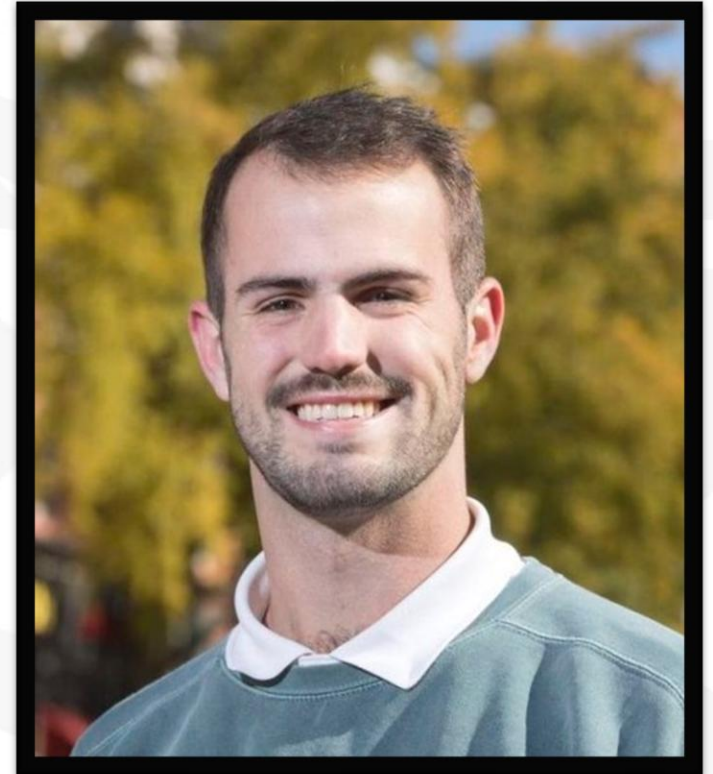
Pronouns: He/They

Education: BBA in Economics (UGA), MSW in progress (UGA)

Job Title: THRIVE Community Programs Team Lead,
also Chair of Athens-Clarke County CoC Board

How I got into this work: Athens PBJs – Bridging
friendships and building community

Favorite Part of Job: Every day is an adventure with a mix of direct client support, resource navigation, empowerment opportunities, and community organizing. I am a better person because of the lessons and stories my clients have trusted me with.



What do
you do?



Advantage Behavioral Health Systems

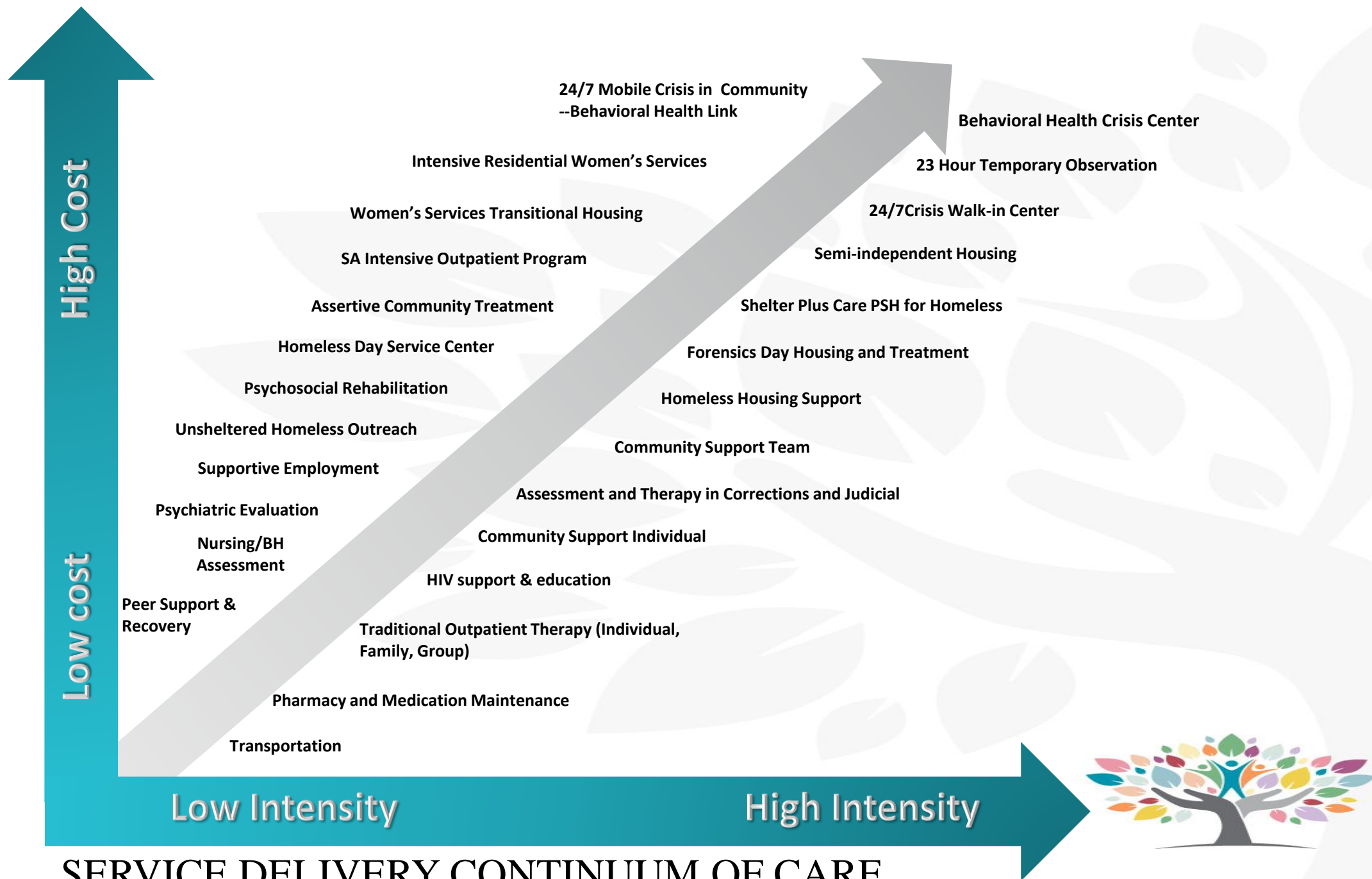
Regional Community Service Board (CSBs) serving the 10-county greater Athens-area in Northeast Georgia

Georgia is one of 10 states that have not opted to expand Medicaid - many unsheltered individuals are uninsured and depend on CSBs for behavioral health services

Advantage provides free and sliding scale behavioral health services to individuals with little or no income and/or no insurance

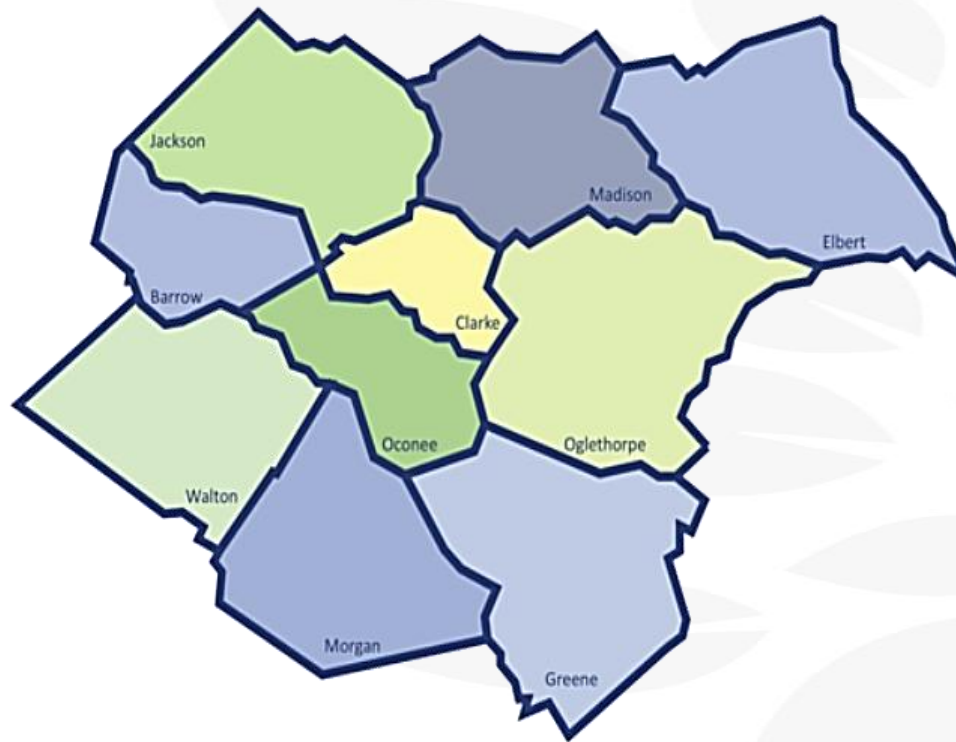
<https://advantagebhs.org/>





SERVICE DELIVERY CONTINUUM OF CARE

Geographic Service Region – Northeast Georgia



10-County ABHS Service Area
CoC is just Clarke; rest are GA
Balance of State



THRIVE Department

THRIVE - Housing/homeless service department

- Transformation
- Housing
- Resilience
- Independence
- Victories
- Empowerment

Street Outreach Values

- Autonomy
- Advocacy
- Empathy
- Honesty

THRIVE Services include

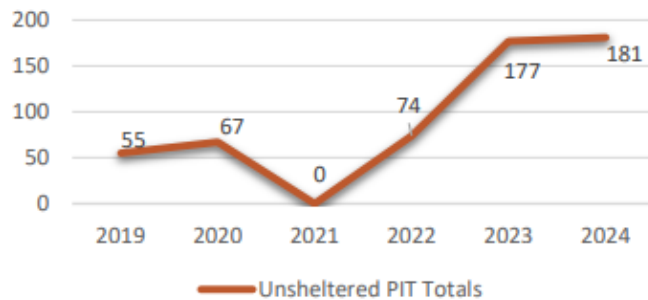
- 200+ Permanent Supportive Housing (CoC-funded, Housing Choice Voucher, and Georgia Housing Voucher Program)
- 24-30 move-ins Rapid Rehousing (ESG)
- 4.5 FT Street Outreach staff (ESG, PATH, ARPA)
- Day Center Services
- ~30 beds in Mental Health Transitional/Treatment Housing (SAMHSA/DBHDD)



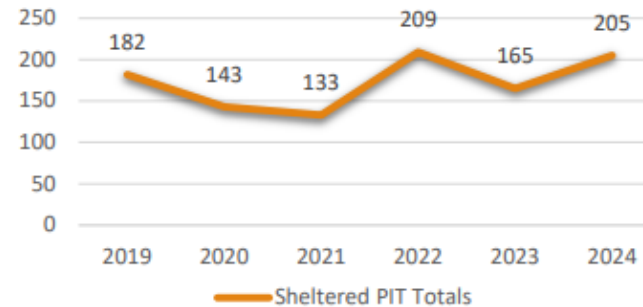
Athens CoC Point in Time Counts

The Point in Time (PIT) count is a count of **sheltered** and **unsheltered** people experiencing homelessness. HUD defines unsheltered homelessness as residing in a place not meant for human habitation. Sheltered homelessness includes individuals staying in **emergency shelter (ES)** and **transitional housing (TH)**.

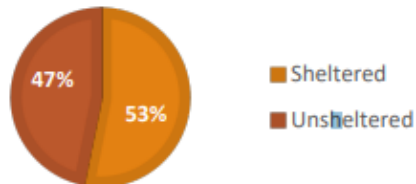
Unsheltered PIT Totals



Sheltered PIT Totals



Sheltered VS. Unsheltered



Total People Surveyed
386

Methodology improved drastically after 2021 resulting in more accurate counts of growing unsheltered population

2023 included the ~55 people in the city-sponsored encampment

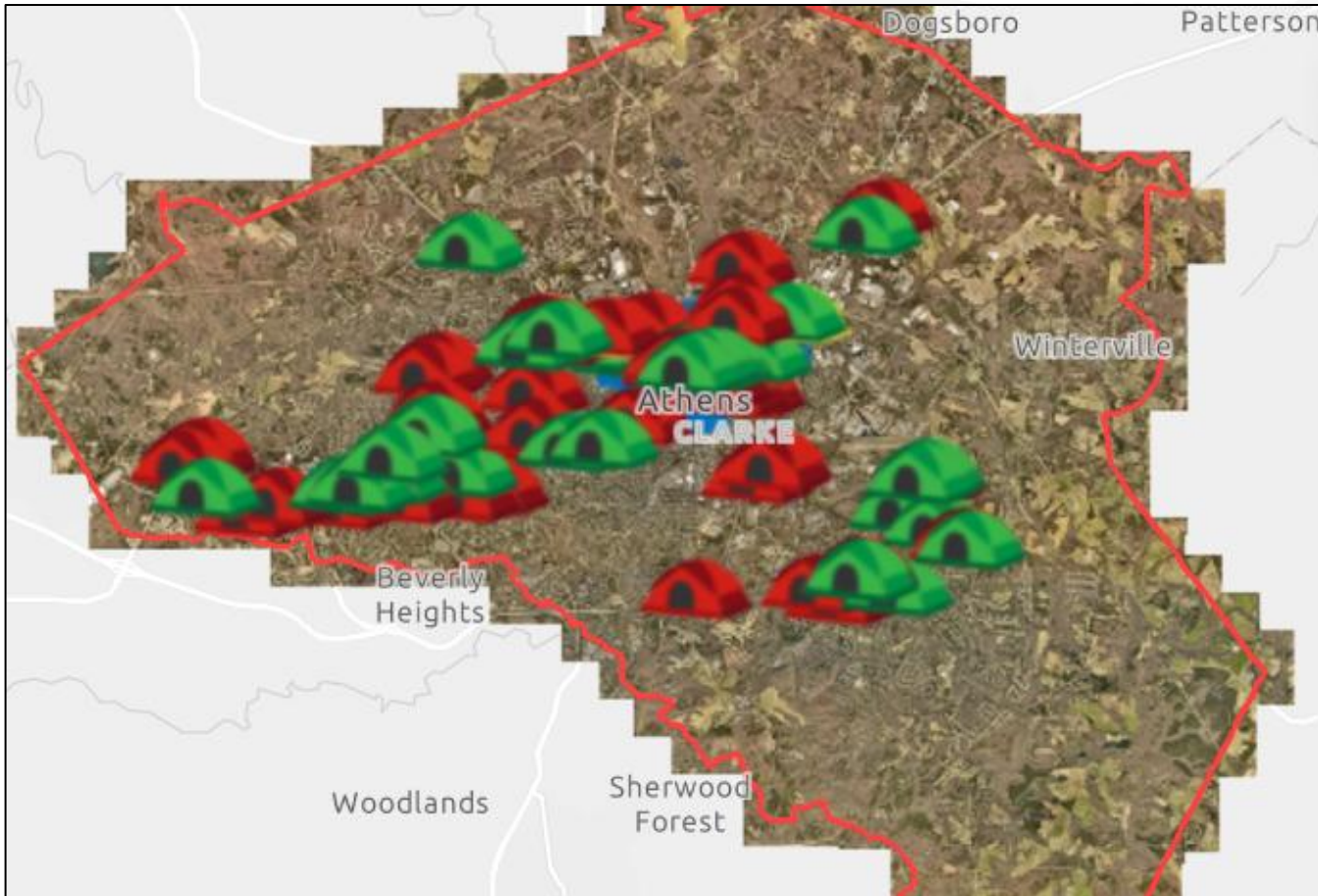


<https://www.accgov.com/DocumentCenter/View/99262/2024-Point-in-Time-and-Housing-Inventory-Count->

What does the
landscape of
unsheltered camps
look like in your
community?



Athens-Clarke County Police Map of Camps



Approximately 25-30 active camps of 2-10 people at any given time

Street Outreach visits all known active camps weekly

“CCRT” Camps get visits 2x per week

Camps mostly in undeveloped parcels of land near tracks and/or highways

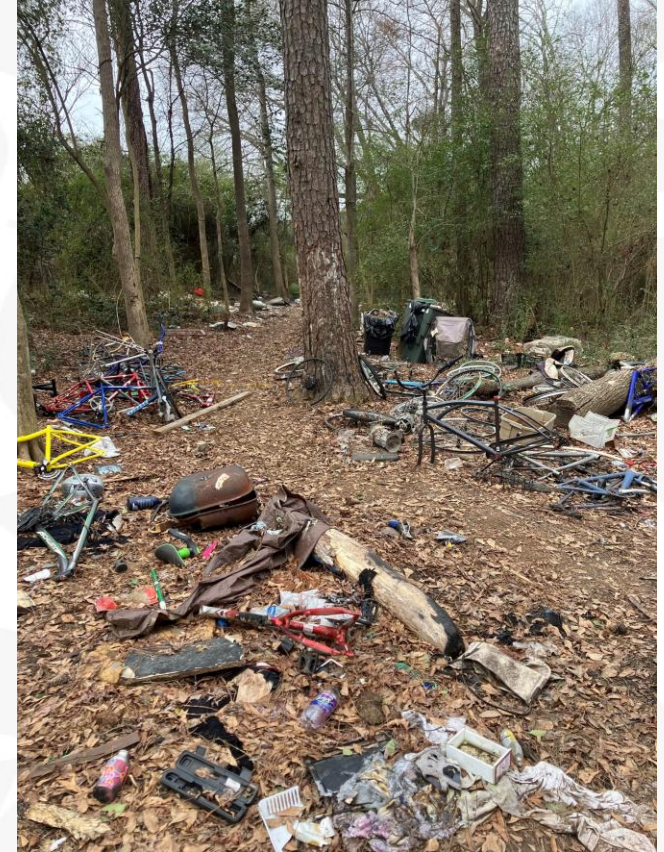


Screenshot taken from ACCPD dashboard

**What types of negative
outcomes or complaints
are generated from
camps?**



Negative Externalities – NIMBY



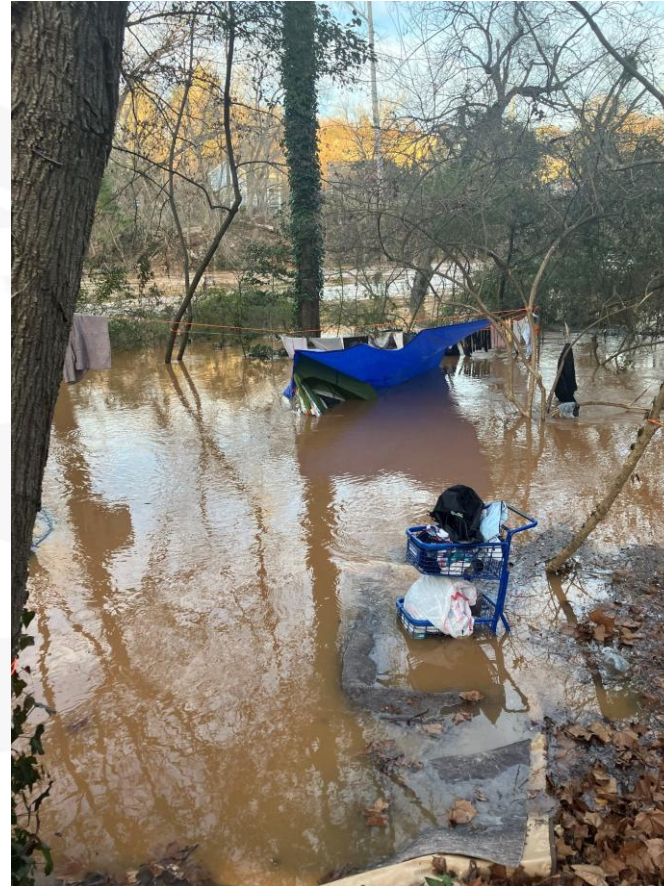
Negative Externalities – Perception of Danger



Negative Externalities – Fires



Negative Externalities



**What do forced
relocations / camp
dispersals look like in
your community?**



First Camp I Saw Shut Down

Summer 2020

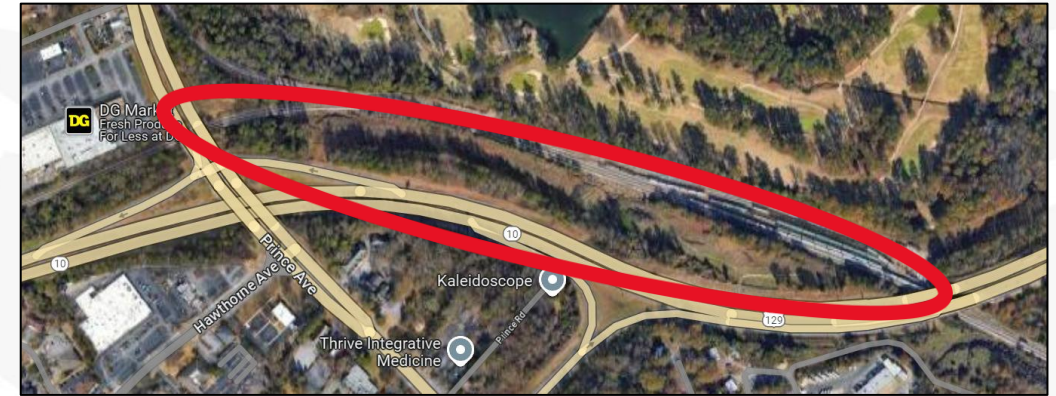
- Friendships during COVID
- Pizza parties and throwing horseshoes

August 2020

- Injury from a campfire
- Rumors in the camp of a police officer telling a couple residents that everyone had to go
- No one knew who or what to believe
- PD suggested it was GA Power property
- GA Power cleared their land

September 2020

- Private property owners show up with PD unannounced with heavy machinery
- Chaos ensues; mass evacuation



The Aftermath - What happens next?

Emailed - newly formed Street Outreach team, our CoC Chair, the county commissioners for that area, the mayor, and others

Everyone relocated to various other parcels in the area - same thing happened within a few months at those parcels

“If we can’t camp here either, why can’t the city give us some land to camp where we won’t be harassed?”

Prompted loosely structured surveys in the field and organizing around what eventually became a city sponsored sanctioned encampment

GA Department of Transportation shutting down some camps also prompted recurring “Camp Crisis Response Team” meetings every other week amongst Street Outreach, Police, student outreach groups, and other stakeholders

Mission of group - increase communication and reduce trauma when facing the situation of camp shut-downs inevitable in our current legal and resource-limited context

These meetings have continued twice monthly since Fall 2020 - mainly just PD and Street Outreach now



Street Outreach Response

Harm Reduction: Mitigate the trauma

- Advocacy, solidarity, autonomy/dignity, and direct support
- Replace camping supplies lost in displacements
- Useful supplies to ease survival such as snacks, electrolyte packets, handwarmers, trash bags, etc.

Partnerships: seek MOUs with relevant providers

- Community Mental Health
- Recovery Programs / Halfway Houses
- Free clinics, dept of public health, harm reduction agencies
- Volunteers / Mutual Aid Networks with trucks
- Shelter and housing providers: get a track started even if it will take a while



How has your
community tried to
respond to camp shut
downs and mitigate
their harmful effects?



First Step Tent Encampment

I did not directly participate in operations; not my story to tell

[Resolution to Address Homelessness \(June 2021, Athens Banner Herald\)](#)

[Sanctioned Encampment Location Selection \(August 2021, Athens Banner Herald\)](#)

[Athens Alliance Coalition \\$2.5mil, 2-year Contract Approval \(December 2021, Flagpole\)](#)

[First Step Encampment Opens \(March 2022, Athens Banner Herald\)](#)

[Struggles at the Encampment, Work Continues \(May 2023, Athens Politics Nerd\)](#)

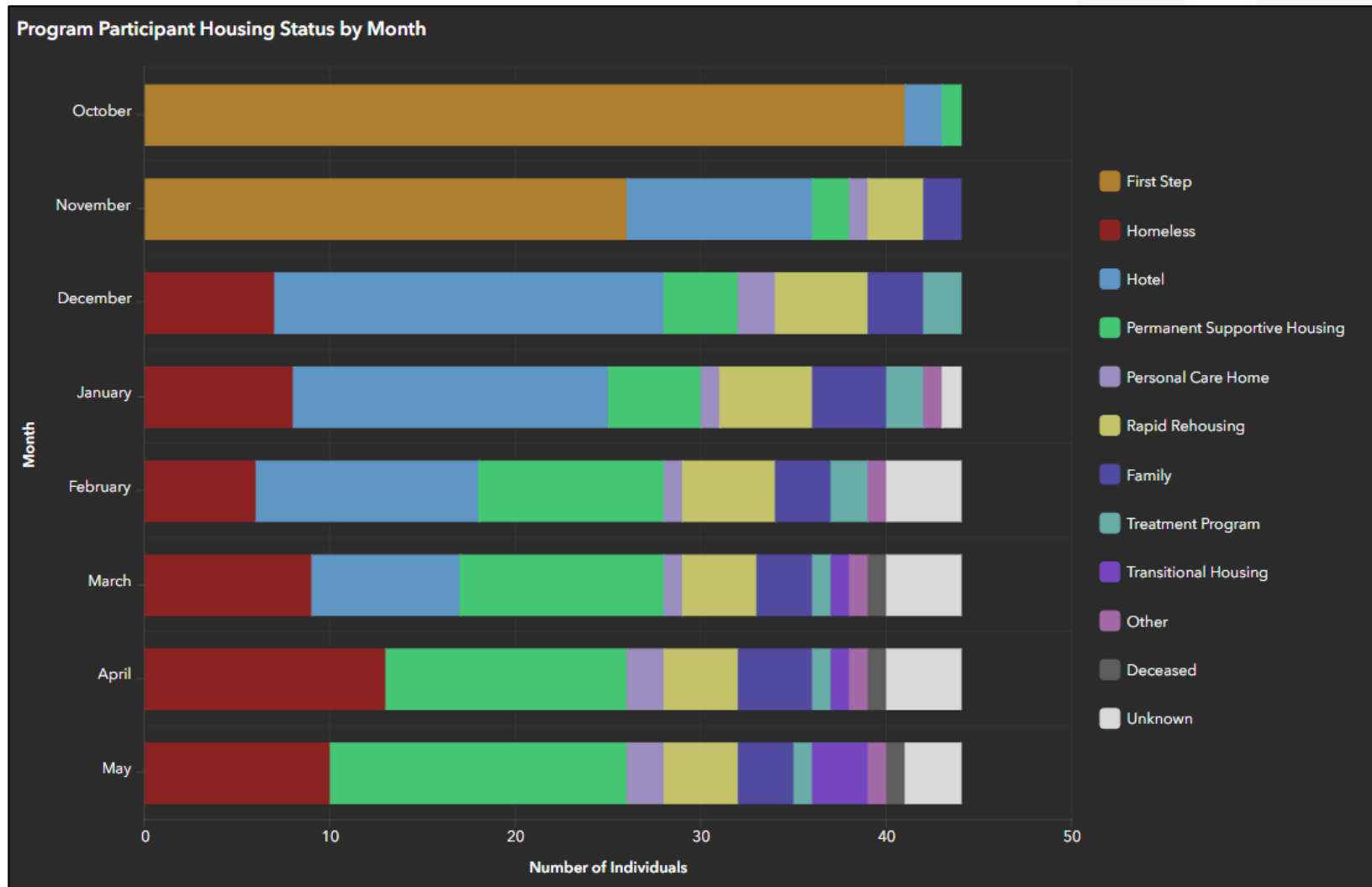
[Vote to Close First Step \(October 2023, Flagpole\)](#)

[First Step Camp Closes; Hotel Voucher Program \(December 2023, Athens Politics Nerd\)](#)

[ABHS Hotel Program Data Dashboard \(May 2024, ACCGov\)](#)



ABHS Hotel Program Data Dashboard



Data used to demonstrate housing first success, acquire ARPA funding for CCRT Team, and build policies and procedures for CCRT Housing



*Living situation reflect last day of each month

Strategies for Street Outreach to Build a Working Relationship with Police

Identify the appropriate contacts in your local police departments to begin discussions with

Learn if homelessness is creating problems for police (officer hours, community relations, etc.)

Start dialogue about how things are going with unsheltered homelessness

- Do police desire to arrest unsheltered individuals for lacking a place to go?
- How do camp shut-downs impact community trust and confidence in police?
- Are residents surprised when camps get shut down? Did they receive any notice?
- Do residents understand property owners make decision to shut down camps?
- What does shutting down camps accomplish? How frequently do the same people end up in same situation somewhere else? How frequently does the same camp get shut down again?
- How well do police understand the shelter/housing resources in the city?
- What could improvement look like? Where could goals overlap?

Productive tension is inevitable → Follow it to collaborative solutions

Effective partnerships with PD can increase accountability and improve outcomes; be an accomplice!



Data Collected (as of 12/31/24)

117 Camps Dispersed (that we know of) since Fall 2020 (some duplicated in count)

- 67 on Private Property
- 41 on County Property
- 9 on State Property

Estimated 607 Individuals Displaced (some duplicated in count)

Many repeated dispersals of same camp site and/or same individuals

Post-dispersal clean-ups could cost \$5,000-50,000+ to the private, public, or institutional property owners

Some receive as little as no notice (landowner has patrol bar individuals) or as much as 8+ weeks notice

County-owned property procedure:

- County manager notifies PD to initiate camp closure process after a complaint is generated
- PD notifies Street Outreach at least 2 business days before visiting camp
- PD visits camp and issues at least 72-hour pre-emptive barring
- PD visits again at time barring becomes active

PD suggests this process to private owners who want camps dispersed



How to Track this Data

Date	Camp	Prop Owner	ppl	Notes
November 2024	Satula Ave	County	1	11/20: Complaint about Pound St. Staff met w clt who was cooperative. 12/2: Geiger going out today, individual agreed to leave.. 1/14: Must vacate by this date
December 2024	North Ave Trestle	Private	11	12/2: complaint and same day shut down due to being on CSX property... 12/3: Entire camp has to go today.. Gone by 12/13
December 2024	Behind Lowe's	Private	3	12/3: Geiger visited on 12/2 and people agreed to leave on their own; Lowe's issued complaint and Geiger made contact without calling Lowe's to inform them of tents back there
December 2024	Under Broad St Bridge	Private	1	12/18: Got complaint about camp, will be given 24hrs from first contact due to being under a bridge.. 1/21: never located anyone, camp is vacated
January 2025	Willow Street Greenway	County	5	12/31: Got notice to vacate by 1/7 from Leisure Services.. 1/13: Everyone vacated
January 2025	MLK / Hobson Ave	Private	5	1/2: Leisure Services submitted complaint to Code Enforcement due to stabbing and alleged other complaints.. 1/6: Residents reported cleaning up lots of trash in camp.. 1/7: Code Enforcement did not determine there to be enough trash accumulated to issue citation
January 2025	Northside Drive	County	1	1/7: ACCPD noticed SO about tent popping up.. 1/8: Staff visited and found one client at camp. Staff informed clt about needing to move and clt agreed to move... 1/14: camp is vacated

If your community is not tracking this data, consider forming a workgroup to discuss and track

Data is very helpful for advocating for solutions



**How many camps have
been shut down in your
community in the past
12 months?**



Camp Crisis Response ARPA Funding

ARPA Contract Awarded in Fall 2024 of \$200,000 (to spend by Fall 2026) specifically for folks in encampments being shut down

ARPA money is flexible - designed flexible policies and procedures around eligibility and uses

Purpose – to provide a coordinated, person-centered, housing-emphasized, and harm reduction-oriented response to community complaints regarding the externalities of unsanctioned encampments

Housing Goals

- Move 1 unsheltered individual into housing per month via “CCRT Housing”
- Move those individuals into PSH within 6 months of moving into housing

Use funds as housing first transitional housing (retaining HUD chronic homeless status to bridge to PSH)

CCRT Housing Intervention:

- Locate a unit that will accept client
- Pay start up costs and purchase move-in supplies
- Cover all rent and all utilities for 3-6 months after move-in with min of 2 contacts with client per month
- Refer to various PSH programs
- Transition client into PSH and help facilitate move (if applicable)



Camp Crisis Response ARPA Funding

1. Outreach conducts typical weekly outreach to known camps
2. A complaint is submitted to a local government office, police, street outreach, or other negative attention drawn to camp
3. Outreach gathers details and attempts to contact complainant and negotiate resolution
4. Outreach visits camp within 1 business day, explains complaint to residents, seeks to develop resolution with residents
5. Outreach develops and finalizes a Census within 4 visits to the camp
6. Outreach continues 2x weekly visits until a continuous 6 weeks of no new complaint

During outreach, staff will offer to enroll individuals into HMIS/CE, connect to BH services, connect to PCP, explore diversion options, connect to other resources, and elicit ongoing participation in negotiated resolution to the original complaint

Resolution is not always identified or feasible dependent on the location and property owner. Examples include in public parks, under bridges, obstructing a roadway, construction zone, etc.

In these cases, staff communicates closure timeline to individuals, encourages their participation to prevent arrest, offers shelter connection or camping supplies, and works to maintain regular contact beyond camp closure.



Camp Crisis Response ARPA Funding

Eligibility for CCRT Housing while in encampment

- A. Lived at encampment at time of most recent complaint (documented in census)
- B. Complaint occurred within the past 6 months
- C. Be enrolled in a Street Outreach program in HMIS
- D. Treatment, fam/friends, or other diversion options attempted and unsuccessful
- E. Staff has realistic opportunity of sustainably placing into PSH within 3-6 months of move-in

Eligibility after moving from encampment that received a complaint or was shut down:

- A. Lived at encampment at time of a complaint and complaint occurred within past 6 months
- B. Same criteria of B, C, D, and E above
- C. Street Outreach maintained at least one contact per 30 days after moving out of encampment

Success Measures:

- Enrollment in HMIS project
- Enrollment in Coordinated Entry
- Connection to Community MH
- Connection to PCP
- Not arrested for trespassing at time of camp closure
- Diverted to shelter or housing by time of camp closure
- Diverted to housing within 6 months of camp closure



Questions / Discussion

Contact Info:

John.Morris@advantagebhs.org

762-234-6535

