

Responding to Encampments with Outreach, Services, and Housing: A Study of Four California Communities

Research into Action | Project #3

Communities across the country are seeking solutions to rising unsheltered homelessness. One [Research Into Action](#) team at Homebase studied different encampment resolution approaches in four California counties—Los Angeles, Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara—by talking to encampment residents, outreach workers, and local homeless services leaders. The encampment closures they studied were typically led by trained professionals who reached out to residents, assessed their needs, provided services, and eventually helped them relocate to an interim site where they could continue to work towards a long-term housing solution.

The person-centered approaches profiled in this study offer communities a helpful roadmap for productively engaging with unsheltered residents. These stand in sharp contrast with enforcement-driven tactics, which ultimately perpetuate harm and do not resolve homelessness.

Key Takeaways

1. Street outreach staff provide vital services to people residing in encampments.

Outreach workers in all four Continuums of Care (CoCs) brought services to unsheltered people, helping them access a variety of resources to address their immediate and long-term needs. Some key activities included conducting assessments, obtaining vital documents like IDs, coordinating with street medicine providers, and transporting people to clinics or appointments—but their work frequently went beyond these examples.

“Anything I asked for help with, they connected me to.” – Via del Oro resident (San Jose)

2. Strong local coordination is necessary to ensure results.

Alignment across jurisdictional partners—from the Parks Department to law enforcement to housing and healthcare—helps ensure that different agencies are not working at cross-purposes but are working together to reduce encampments by sustainably resolving people’s homelessness. However, building relationships and maintaining ongoing communication takes time and resources.

3. Listening to encampment residents results in better-designed programs that successfully help people connect to services.

The researchers spoke with 65 people who currently or previously lived in an encampment. Put plainly, people are experts on encampment dynamics and what residents need. Outreach is more

successful when staff seek to learn from residents and design solutions together. That way, for example, no one is unintentionally left out of a housing list because they work during the day when outreach staff are most likely to be at the encampment.

“We want dignity, agency, and clear and respectful communication. We don’t want to be displaced and policed under the guise of housing support.” — Mosswood Park resident (Oakland)

Workers and residents can also work together toward temporary solutions that benefit everyone. For instance, encampment residents needed hygiene and sanitation support like regular trash pick-ups. When it was made available, it helped residents keep their living areas clean, but it also mitigated community and government agency concerns about public health issues.

Finally, listening to residents facilitated steps toward permanent solutions. As a group, encampment residents are sometimes stereotyped as being service-resistant, choosing to be homeless rather than accepting available assistance.

The researchers heard a different story. Many people the researchers spoke with had been unsheltered for a while. During this time, enforcement of anti-camping ordinances caused repeated harm, often leading to displacement or lost or destroyed possessions. Several shared past negative experiences with service providers that included feeling disrespected or discriminated against. Significantly, many had previously believed they would receive housing and other services, only to find that service providers were unable to deliver. Residents were not service-resistant, but highly skeptical that outreach workers could actually help them.

Given these circumstances, successful encampment resolution protocols focused on open and consistent communication, employing peers as street outreach workers, demonstrating reliability, and sharing resolution plans (for example, how belongings would be transported).

The Homebase team identified 7 key themes to high-quality encampment engagement:

1. Clear, consistent communication builds trust.
2. Reliability and follow-through motivate participation.
3. Residents value fairness and inclusion in housing selection.
4. Reliable service access and coordination matter.
5. Dignity, autonomy, and respect shape participation.
6. Housing and programs should be designed for safety and comfort.
7. Interim housing is an important step, but stability requires longer-term support.

Learn more and read the full report:

[In Their Own Words: Californians’ Journeys from Encampments to Housing](#)

“They always got back to me about the questions I had—maybe not that day but they’d always follow up.” – Berkeley resident

4. Long-term success requires clearly defined pathways to permanent housing.

Most of the encampment resolution initiatives the researchers studied helped people move into interim housing sites. Some residents negatively described these settings as being institutional or “lacking in services.” But many felt that these stays—often in private rooms in motels that allowed them to bring their possessions and pets—offered safety and stability. From here, they were in a better place to work on things they needed to move to housing on their own. As one Berkeley resident said upon moving in, “My outlook on the future has changed.”

Unfortunately, however, available data show that the path to permanent housing stability wasn't a straight one. In Berkeley, for example, only 20 of 201 people engaged through encampment resolution efforts between 2021-2025 were in permanent housing as of August 2025. Everyone else was either still in interim housing (90 people) or had returned to homelessness (91 people).

Communities might choose to pursue interim housing because it seems like a faster option given the scarcity of permanent housing resources (especially in these four communities, which notably have some of the [highest housing costs](#) in the country). But if communities do not establish viable pathways to long-term housing before beginning any encampment response effort, they risk leaving people to languish in interim housing at a high cost to the public or suffer returns to homelessness.

Implications: Research into Action

The Alliance identified ways this research could inform policy and practice:

- **Federal, state, and local governments must increase the amount of funding available for unsheltered homelessness.** Historically, service providers have been underfunded, leaving them unable to provide housing and services to unsheltered people. The communities in this study improved their outreach and interim housing options thanks in part to new government investments (California's Encampment Resolution Funding Program and HUD's Special Notice of Funding Opportunity to Address Rural & Unsheltered Homelessness). However, new investments are too often temporary and insufficient. For example, political shifts threaten the future of the funding streams benefiting the communities in this study. And the funds, though helpful in providing interim housing, still left residents without enough permanent housing options. Ongoing government funding for systemwide responses including outreach, supportive services, and rental assistance, is necessary to realize nationwide reductions in unsheltered homelessness.
- **Policymakers should strengthen street outreach programs.** Street outreach workers were critical to the success of the encampment resolution strategies in these California communities. The workers listened, demonstrated patience and persistence, and successfully connected people with services and interim housing. Despite the demonstrated value of street outreach, there are no assurances that all or most communities will have such services. Existing programs often lack what they need to serve their clients, including access to housing and supportive services. Finally, street outreach programs are prone to high employee turnover due to funding and other challenges. Policymakers should restructure homeless services legislation, ensuring that more communities have street outreach programs, that existing programs have greater reach, that providers are guaranteed access to the offerings needed to effectively serve people, and that supports and incentives are created to encourage employee hiring and retention. Further, programs and systems outside of homeless services should be incentivized to support street outreach programs in achieving their goals.

- **When resolving encampments, communities should employ person-centered strategies.** The researchers identified strategies utilized by street outreach workers that were particularly effective in working with encampment residents. Uplifting the actual comments of people being served, the report highlights how they responded positively to these workers' efforts. Systems and providers should implement these and other strategies that emphasize open communication, reliability, follow through, and respectful treatment of clients.
- **Communities would benefit from collecting and analyzing data on encampment response efforts.** In many CoCs, data systems are not set up to track who is engaged through an encampment response initiative and where they go afterwards. Berkely's data is a powerful example of why tracking such information is necessary. Communities must be able to understand the impact of their efforts to ensure they are creating stable exits from homelessness. Granular data can also help CoCs to continually improve their work, such as by understanding how factors like encampment size and service intensity might influence outcomes (see Appendix C of the report for an example of what type of analysis is possible with this data).
- **Ongoing research can help answer pressing questions about how best to respond to encampments.** What is an appropriate role for interim housing in encampment response? What conditions and resources enable efforts to house people directly from encampments? Similarly, most people sought services and housing when offered to them, but not everyone. Who isn't participating, and how can service providers better reach this population?