HOMELESS SYSTEM SIMULATION

Facilitator Guide

Purpose

The Homeless System Simulation is an interactive learning activity that helps participants examine how a homelessness response system functions under pressure. Participants manage different parts of the system, make time-limited system-change decisions, move person markers through program pathways, and reflect on how capacity, program design, prioritization, and collaboration affect outcomes.

The simulation is intentionally simplified. Its value is in the discussion it creates about real system dynamics, trade-offs, backlogs, pathways to housing, and the consequences of delayed or fragmented decision-making.

Core message
Every marker represents a person. Every move reflects a system choice.

Learning Objectives

- Understand how different parts of a homelessness response system interact.
- Experience how capacity limits and program rules affect movement through the system.
- Practice making system-level decisions under time constraints.
- Notice how early decisions can create or relieve bottlenecks later in the simulation.
- Reflect on how data, planning, governance, and collaboration influence outcomes.

Recommended Timing

Segment	Suggested Time
Welcome, table setup, and orientation	10-15 minutes
Five simulation rounds	5 minutes per round
System-change decision time	3 minutes when a System Event card allows a decision
Final scoring	5-10 minutes
Debrief and discussion	20-35 minutes
Total recommended session length	75-100 minutes

For shorter sessions, protect the debrief time as much as possible. The learning comes from both the movement during the activity and the reflection afterward.

Materials Checklist

- Simulation boards for Coordinated Entry / Intake, Emergency Shelter, Rapid Re-Housing, Outreach, Transitional Housing, Permanent Supportive Housing, and Extra / Added or Converted Program.
- Program Movement cards for each program area.
- System Event cards for the Data Tracker.
- Outcomes Tracker for each table.
- Person markers in two clearly distinguishable types.
- Containers or bins labeled Unsheltered Homelessness and Market Housing.
- Pens or dry-erase markers for program conversion/addition notes.
- Timer visible to the facilitator.
- Table identifiers, such as table numbers, letters, or themed table tents, for outcomes comparison and debrief.
- Key Terms & Activity Language handout for facilitators.
- Optional: Round Reflection Sheet for each table to capture one observation after each round.

Marker Language **(Do not share with participants)**

The activity can be facilitated with beads, bingo chips, tokens, buttons, counters, or other small objects. Use the term person markers throughout the activity so the materials can vary by group or travel kit. Do not answer questions or give hints to what the different person markers mean. There will be an opportunity to discuss the person markers at the end of the activity.

Term	Meaning
Person markers	All small objects used to represent people or households moving through the simulation.
Elevated Support markers	Markers represent people whose pathway may require additional support, flexibility, coordination, or problem-solving from the system.
Standard Support markers	Markers that represent people whose pathway may require a less intensive or more typical level of system response.

Before play begins, the facilitator should note to themselves which physical marker represents Elevated Support and which represents Standard Support. These markers are not labels for people; they are tools for examining how systems respond to different needs, barriers, and circumstances.

Room and Table Setup

- Assign each table an identifier before the simulation begins. Use table identifiers when collecting scores, inviting tables to share decisions, or comparing outcomes during the debrief.
- **Table size.** Seven participants is ideal: six Program Leads and one Scorekeeper. If a table has eight participants, split the Scorekeeper role so one person reads System Event cards and one person records outcomes and system-change notes. If a table has nine or more participants, assign additional participants as Observers. Observers should watch for bottlenecks, decision points, and participant reactions, and may contribute during the debrief.
- **Table-readiness signs.** If using table-readiness signs, place one yellow and one green sign at each table.
  - Yellow = Open seats available. Participants may continue joining this table.
  - Green = Table is full and ready to begin. The table has the needed roles filled.

Ask tables to display the yellow sign while they wait for additional participants, and switch to the green sign once they have enough participants to begin. Facilitators and room support can use the signs to quickly identify which tables still need participants.

- Each table should identify one Data Tracker and six Program Leads.
  - If a table has eight participants, split the Data Tracker role: one person reads System Event cards and one person records the outcomes.
- Place the Unsheltered Homelessness and Market Housing containers where all Program Leads can access them.
- Give each Program Lead the board and Program Event cards for their assigned program area.

Facilitation team roles.

For larger rooms, assign facilitation roles before participants arrive.

Suggested roles include:

- Lead Facilitator
- Timekeeper/Slide Advance
- Floor Support
- Data Tracker
- Debrief Facilitator.

One person may hold multiple roles in a smaller room.

If roles shift during the session, plan the handoff in advance so the transition feels seamless to participants.

Program Lead Roles and Starting Setup

Program Leads take turns in this order each round:

Role	Materials	Starting Setup
Coordinated Entry / Intake Program Lead	Coordinated Entry / Intake board and cards	No starting markers
Emergency Shelter Program Lead	Emergency Shelter board and cards	20 person markers: 6 Elevated Support, 14 Standard Support
Rapid Re-Housing Program Lead	Rapid Re-Housing board and cards	10 person markers: 1 Elevated Support, 9 Standard Support
Outreach Program Lead	Outreach board and cards	8 person markers: 2 Elevated Support, 6 Standard Support
Transitional Housing Program Lead	Transitional Housing board and cards	16 person markers: 4 Elevated Support, 12 Standard Support
Permanent Supportive Housing Program Lead	Permanent Supportive Housing board and cards	20 person markers: 12 Elevated Support, 8 Standard Support
Data Tracker	Outcomes Tracker and System Event cards	No starting markers

Only one person marker may occupy each slot on a board. Unless a card gives a specific instruction, markers may be placed in any available slot on that board.

Each Program Lead should complete all movement instructions on their card before the next Program Lead begins.

Facilitator Run-of-Show

1. **Welcome and frame the activity.** Explain that the simulation is a simplified model of a homelessness response system. The goal is to move as many person markers as possible toward housing while noticing the system choices and trade-offs made along the way.
2. **Note to facilitator: the marker key.** Keep in mind which of the physical markers are being used for Elevated Support and Standard Support. Redirect participant questions about person markers as needed.
3. **Assign roles and distribute materials.** Each table should have six Program Leads and one Data Tracker. Provide the Participant / Table Instructions and Outcomes Tracker. Make sure tables are using start up person markers for Round 1.
4. **Review the official turn order.** Coordinated Entry / Intake, Emergency Shelter, Rapid Re-Housing, Outreach, Transitional Housing, Permanent Supportive Housing.
5. **Start Round 1 (5 minutes with grace).** The Data Tracker reads the System Event card. Program Leads then read and carry out their cards in the official turn order. Allow more time in Round 1 as needed.
6. **Prompt scoring at the end of each round.** At the end of each round, Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing report the number of person markers remaining on their boards. The Data Tracker records those counts.
7. **Manage timing.** Allow 5 minutes per round. When a System Event card allows a decision, allow 3 minutes for the table to decide whether to add a program, convert a program, or open Diversion if that option is available.
8. **Keep tables moving.** Announce the start and end of each round. Tables have 5 minutes to complete the round and 3 minutes to make a system change decision. If a table doesn't make a decision within the allotted 3 minutes, it forfeits the opportunity to make a system change that round. Tables that finish the round, make their decision, or both ahead of schedule may move on once both steps are complete. There's no penalty for finishing early. The only penalty is for missing the 3-minute decision deadline.
9. **Available program slots**. This means open spaces on active program boards. Market Housing and Unsheltered Homelessness are destinations, not program slots. Only move markers to Market Housing or Unsheltered Homelessness when a card specifically tells you to do so. If a card gives a placement order, fill available slots in that order. If one program does not have enough open slots, fill the available slots and continue to the next program listed on the card.
10. **Complete final scoring.** At the end of Round 5, Data Trackers count the Unsheltered Homelessness bin, Market Housing bin, Rapid Re-Housing board, and Permanent Supportive Housing board.
11. **Debrief.** Use outcomes and system-change notes to explore what happened, why it happened, and how the experience connects to real system planning.

System-Change Decisions

Some System Event cards allow tables to make system-level changes. These choices are time-limited to mirror the pressure of real community decision-making.

Decision	How to Facilitate It

Add a program	Use the Extra board. Write the added program type on the board. The Program Lead who already manages that program type also manages the added board.
Open Diversion	Use Column F on the Coordinated Entry / Intake board if the System Event card allows it. Follow the current Coordinated Entry / Intake card instructions for Column F.
Convert a program	Cross out the current program name and write the new program name. Current markers remain in place. The converted board now follows the cards and turn timing for the new program type.

Scoring Guidance

The Outcomes Tracker is designed so the lowest final simulation outcome wins. It counts both the accumulation of temporary placements during the rounds and final destinations at the end of the simulation.

- End of each round: count person markers remaining on Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing boards. Add those counts across each row and total all five rounds.
- Final homeless outcomes: add the Round Count Total to the Unsheltered Homelessness count multiplied by 3.
- Final housing outcomes: add the person markers in Market Housing, Rapid Re-Housing, and Permanent Supportive Housing.
- Final simulation outcome: Homeless outcomes minus Housing outcomes. Lowest simulation outcome wins.
- Common scoring mistake: forgetting to multiply the Unsheltered Homelessness count by 3.

Round-by-Round Table Reflection

After each round, give tables a brief moment to capture what happened before moving to the next round. This helps participants remember how early decisions affected later outcomes.

Use this sequence at the end of each round:

1. **Complete the outcomes tracker.** The Data Tracker records the required round counts.
2. **Reflect briefly.** Give tables approximately 2 minutes to discuss the round prompt.
3. **Record one key takeaway.** Ask the Data Tracker or another table member to write down one key observation, decision, or question from the round.
4. **Move on.** Bring the room back together and begin the next round.

Suggested prompts:

- **Round 1:** What did you notice during the first round of movement?
- **Round 2:** Based on what your table added or opened, what impact did that decision have?
- **Round 3:** If your table converted a program, what changed? If you did not convert a program, what influenced that decision?
- **Round 4:** If your table converted a program, what changed? If you did not convert a program, what influenced that decision?
- **Round 5:** Based on your final simulation outcome and final system map, how successful was your system? What trade-offs shaped that result?

Keep these reflections brief. The purpose is not to fully debrief each round, but to preserve observations for the larger discussion at the end.

Comparing table outcomes.

Once tables complete final outcomes, collect or call out final simulation outcomes and display them where the room can see them. This may be done on a flip chart, slide, whiteboard, or by score ranges if the room is large. If a score is significantly lower or higher than the others, quickly check the outcomes tracker to ensure it was completed correctly. The most common scoring mistake is forgetting to multiply the Unsheltered Homelessness count by 3.

Facilitators note for information: In prior versions of the simulation, lower outcomes often resulted from opening Diversion and adding or converting programs that increased movement toward housing. Higher outcomes often resulted when tables were unable to reach consensus or did not use system-change opportunities.

Listing or comparing outcomes helps generate discussion. During the debrief, ask lower-scoring and higher-scoring tables what system-change decisions they made, including whether they opened Diversion, added programs, converted programs, or struggled to reach consensus.

Debrief Guide

Begin with what participants noticed before moving into analysis. Use the outcomes tracker and system-change notes as conversation anchors rather than treating the activity as only a competition.

For large rooms, use a microphone, mic runner, or soft throwable discussion object to invite table responses. If a participant responds without a microphone, the facilitator should repeat or summarize the comment before moving on so the full room can hear it. This also validates the participant's contribution and keeps the discussion accessible.

- What felt realistic about the simulation? What felt simplified or unrealistic?
- Where did your system experience the greatest backlog?
- What system-change decisions did your table make? What did you add, convert, or open?
- How did your table make decisions under time pressure? What influenced the decision? What information did you wish you had?
- For tables with lower scores: What choices helped move more markers toward housing or reduce unsheltered exits?
- For tables with higher scores: Where did the system get stuck, and what decision points might have changed the outcome?
- Which programs moved the most person markers toward housing? Which programs had the least movement?
- What happened to Elevated Support markers? Did your decisions affect their pathways differently?
- How did early decisions affect later rounds?
- What does this simulation suggest about the role of data, planning, governance, and community-wide decision-making?
- What parallels do you see with your local system?
- What is one system question you want to take back to your community or organization?

Debrief Points to Listen For

- Opening Diversion can reduce pressure elsewhere in the system when it is used effectively.
- Adding or converting programs can relieve some bottlenecks but may create new pressure points.
- Rapid Re-Housing tends to create more movement toward permanent housing in the simulation.
- Permanent Supportive Housing may be especially important for people represented by Elevated Support markers because it pairs permanent housing with ongoing support services.
- Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing can hold people temporarily, but they may also become backlogged when exits are limited.
- Consensus, governance, and data matter because delayed decisions have downstream consequences.

Troubleshooting and Facilitation Tips

- **Tables move at different speeds.** Keep the whole room on the same round when possible. If a table finishes early, ask them to review their outcomes tracker and system-change notes rather than jumping ahead.
- **A table cannot make a decision.** Remind them that no decision is also a system decision. If the 3-minute window closes, they forfeit that opportunity and continue play.
- **Participants want more realism.** Affirm that the simulation is simplified by design and invite them to name what real-world dynamics should be discussed in the debrief.
- **Scoring seems wrong.** Check that Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing were counted after every round and that the final Unsheltered Homelessness count was multiplied by 3.
- **Marker colors differ by kit.** Use the marker key, not colors, when giving verbal instructions. Say Elevated Support markers and Standard Support markers.

Closing Language

This simulation is not about winning a game; it is about seeing a system in motion. The outcomes help us compare different pathways and decisions, but the most important outcome is the conversation about how local systems can use data, collaboration, and planning to improve housing outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.