

# Interagency Collaboration Addresses Homelessness

Housing is a foundational social determinant of health. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the crises of housing and homelessness in California: almost one-third of renters are severely cost-burdened, and the number of people experiencing homelessness is growing.[1] According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 161,548 people were experiencing homelessness in California in January 2020.[2].

Black, Latinx, and Native populations in California are disproportionately impacted by the housing shortage and homelessness as a result of systemic and institutionalized racism. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have identified people experiencing homelessness as particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.[3] Many people experiencing homelessness are older adults and have chronic health conditions that increase the risk of COVID-19 complications. Homeless services are traditionally provided in congregate settings that increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Many shelters, along with other public services, have closed or reduced services, exacerbating barriers to care, hygiene, and sanitation.

Getting vaccinated against COVID-19 is critical to reducing spread and severe illness; however, estimates indicate lower vaccination rates among people experiencing homelessness, as unhoused individuals may encounter additional barriers to vaccination and continued hesitancy due to a lack of trusted messengers and appropriate outreach.[4]

Addressing the intersecting crises of housing, homelessness, racism, and COVID-19 requires interagency coordination that centers health and racial equity in its approach. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Health in All Policies (HiAP) program is using CDC Preventative Health Services Block Grant funding to address housing and homelessness through a collaborative approach to incorporate health, equity, and sustainability considerations into State agencies and programs.

HiAP staff, with the Department of Social Services (DSS); Business, Consumer Services, and Housing Agency (BCHS); and the CDPH Office of AIDs and Division of Communicable Disease Control, launched an interagency working group to share promising strategies, lessons learned, and guidance on COVID-19's impact on people experiencing homelessness. HiAP is leading the design and launch of a peer ambassador COVID-19 vaccine and testing initiative to address people experiencing homelessness's increased risk for COVID-19 infection and low vaccination rates. This initiative is being designed in close partnership with community-based organizations (CBOs) that are recognized experts in the areas of housing and homelessness and who prioritize the leadership and engagement of people with lived experience.

When launched, the peer ambassador initiative will increase vaccination among unsheltered populations, as well as strengthen collaboration among service providers, CBOs, and local health departments; develop resources on promising practices for providing services and outreach to unhoused individuals; and to strengthen CBO capacity to work with and elevate the skills and knowledge of people with lived experience. With results from the first round, HiAP hopes to strengthen and scale up the vaccine ambassador program.

The interagency working group has established a critical model for the State agency coordination that is delineated in the State Action Plan for Prevention and Ending Homelessness. In September 2021, Governor Newsom signed legislation that would direct over \$20 billion to housing and homelessness prevention and response, with public health identified as having a key role. HiAP will continue to actively engage in and support these collaborative processes, leading efforts to identify the upstream drivers of homelessness while promoting the prioritization of health equity and antiracism.

*Federal Fiscal Year 2021 Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant Success Story by the Health in All Policies Program*

---

## Footnotes

1. Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. Renter Cost Burdens, States [website]. Updated 2016. Available at [https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/ARH\\_2017\\_cost\\_burdens\\_by\\_state\\_total](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/ARH_2017_cost_burdens_by_state_total)
2. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. California Homelessness Statistics [website]. Updated 2020. Available at: <https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/ca>
3. CDC. People Experiencing Homelessness [website]. Updated Jul 3, 2021. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/homelessness.html>
4. Bishari N, As COVID Cases Surge Among SF's Homeless, Shelter Options Narrow, SF Public Press. Updated Aug 8, 2021. Available at: <https://www.sfpublishpress.org/as-covid-cases-surge-among-sfs-homeless-shelter-options-narrow/>