



**LIVED EXPERTISE FOCUS GROUP
REPORT**
LOS ANGELES HOMELESSNESS GOVERNANCE

Overview

People who have experienced homelessness are uniquely able to identify the urgent operational and policy challenges in the homelessness system and potential solutions. Los Angeles County voters recognize this and support formerly unhoused people playing leadership roles in solving homelessness.¹ Throughout our partnership with the Committee for Greater LA, we have benefited from interviewing and consulting with people who have experienced homelessness, including the set of focus groups described here. The focus group findings are largely consistent with what we have heard from other people with lived expertise in homelessness, as well as interviews with service providers, housing developers, and the Los Angeles County voters who participated in focus groups conducted by David Binder Research. The findings are also consistent with findings from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness.² The findings also amplify systemic barriers of racial inequality and gender discrimination that have led to overwhelming subpopulations of poverty and homelessness.

Redstone and the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) conducted three focus groups with people who have experienced homelessness to better understand their perspectives on governance challenges and solutions. These virtual focus groups were conducted between February 24 and March 7, 2022. There were 19 focus group participants in total, varying in gender, race, and age. Participants had all experienced homelessness in Los Angeles County and currently interact with the system as advocates, case managers, and advisors to various organizations and agencies.³ We conducted focus groups with a small number of people, and the experiences and opinions raised here noted are not meant to be representative of all people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles.

¹ David Binder Research, *Attitudes on Homelessness in Los Angeles: Qualitative Research Summary for Voter Focus Groups*. More [here](#).

² Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, *Report and Recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness*. More [here](#), where they recommend improved data collection on issues affecting Black people experiencing homelessness, cross-system collaboration and partnerships to address the revolving door between incarceration and homelessness, more care and empathy from outreach and case management workers, and inclusion of lived experienced in all aspects of program and policy design.

³ Participants have been part of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's Lived Expertise Advisory Board, CSH's Speak Up! Advocates, Continuum of Care (CoC) boards, the Domestic Violence Homeless Services Coalition, and People Assisting the Homeless, among other providers and initiatives.

Key findings

1. The Los Angeles housing and homelessness systems have struggled to create and provide access to housing options and connect the unhoused population to dignified services.
2. A lack of centralized leadership, regional planning, and accountability create miscoordination that is strongly felt by those experiencing homelessness.
3. Improved governmental interagency coordination between the County, cities, LAHSA, and public agencies is needed to ensure adequate housing supply and holistic wraparound services before, during, and after homelessness.
4. Compassionate case managers, navigators, and advocates, including those with lived expertise, have successfully navigated participants from street homelessness to stability and deserve ongoing investment.
5. People who have experienced homelessness should have formal roles on the ground and in senior leadership across the system given their expertise.
6. Data should be reported in real-time and used to improve programs and services
7. An improved public narrative about people who experience homelessness can strengthen the ongoing and future efforts to combat homelessness in Los Angeles.

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“I think that more money should be invested in those who are doing the footwork. You can’t house people from behind a computer.”

“The joining and alignment of the system is what is so important. I don’t understand why everyone is in the same game, but they don’t act like partners. They act like competition, and that doesn’t help solve homelessness.”

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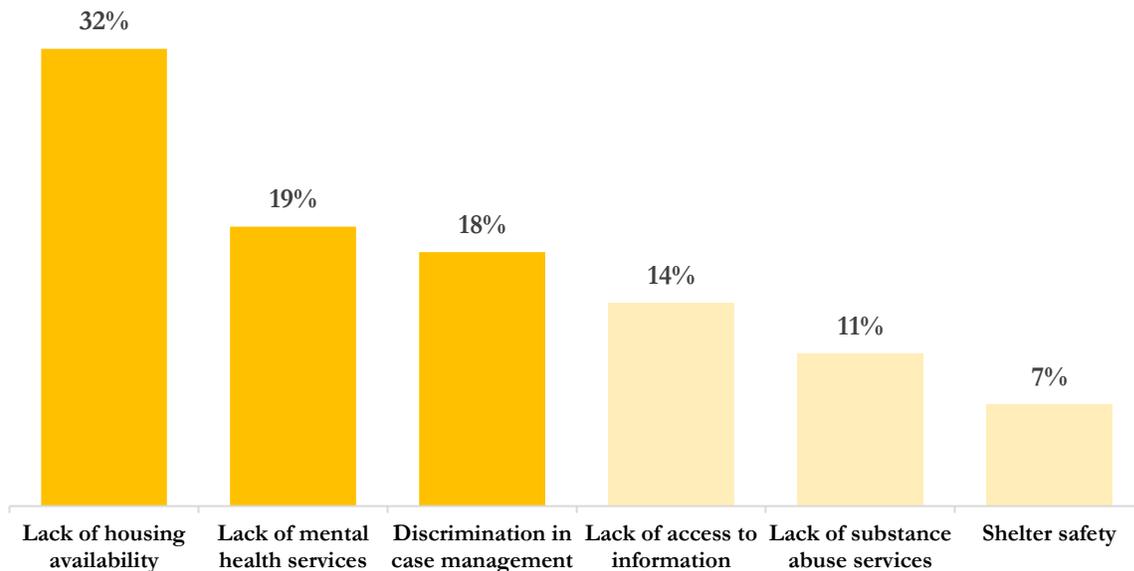
Detailed findings

1. The Los Angeles housing and homelessness systems have struggled to create and provide access to housing options and connect the unhoused population to dignified services

Participants were asked to select the three most urgent issues that people experiencing homelessness face in Los Angeles. A common reaction to the prompt was, “All of these are important,” and participants shared their experiences looking for shelters and more permanent housing; securing resources such as general relief, electronic benefit transfer cards, and bus passes; and accessing social services for mental health and trauma, among others.

Nonetheless, a few common priorities across the housing and homelessness systems emerged.⁴ Nearly everyone cited housing availability in their top three issues. Other top choices relate to lack of quality services, primarily mental health and case management.

Figure 1: Housing availability, mental health services, and discrimination in case management and services were cited as the top three issues faced by unhoused people in Los Angeles (n = 19)



Lack of housing availability was consistently cited as one of the most urgent homelessness issues. Participants perceive an overall lack of affordable housing being built in Los Angeles. Participants felt this shortage by having had to wait upwards of three to ten years on housing waitlists before being assigned a unit.⁵ They moved between streets, encampments, and different shelters while waiting. Temporary housing and shelters are short in supply, even as many participants shared that

⁴ The housing system consists of various public agencies such as city planning departments, public housing authorities, housing trusts (e.g., LA County Development Authority, City of LA Dept. of Planning, San Gabriel Valley Regional Housing Trust) and housing providers and developers. The homelessness system includes public agencies and service providers in charge of the essential services for unhoused and recently housed individuals (e.g., LAHSA, The People Concern, St. Joseph Center). Key policies and programs for both these systems are often governed by local elected officials in cities and the County.

⁵ The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that families who received vouchers from the 50 largest housing agencies had to wait, on average, two and a half years on waitlists first. In Los Angeles, the average wait time is between two and a half and four years, depending on the local housing authority.

they appreciated having some form of housing over none. Some avoided shelters and lived out of their RVs and cars as they looked for more stable housing. Lack of proper housing—interim or permanent—has led to physical harm and mental trauma to the unhoused.⁶

“There are a lot of RVs with people who have no lights, no gas. Recently one resident in an RV burned to death. I’m seeing a lot of parents with children in tents around the RVs. I’m seeing one to five kids. I am seeing a lot of women being victimized at night.”

“It’s not a lack of all housing. There are plenty of luxury apartments being built. It is a lack of housing for low income. There is a lack of housing vouchers. Waitlists are 10+ years sometimes.”

One participant recognized that sometimes the problem is not a lack of housing units or vouchers, but issues with agencies’ disbursement of vouchers and landlords’ reluctance to accept those vouchers. Another shared that people were not being moved quickly enough into empty units. Someone else said that because of housing scarcity, some unhoused people are moved to areas completely foreign to them, without the necessary support to navigate the new neighborhoods.

“I have been in this [supportive housing] building for four and a half years and there are consistently three or more units available at any given time. High turnover of maintenance and property managers has caused backlog. Inspectors delay inspecting units. I walk out to the front [of the building], and people are still homeless, waiting for housing. People want to live inside.”

Lack of mental health services and trauma-informed care are felt deeply. Participants shared that the phenomenon of becoming unhoused comes with its own trauma. Some stated that substance abuse, domestic violence, and being in prison are some of the conditions that lead to homelessness or are an effect of homelessness. Almost all cited the trauma of being unhoused, whether living on the street or in a difficult shelter. They said it was likely that all people experiencing homelessness should be offered some degree of mental health services.

“I think there should be a program for people who have been homeless in the past. It’s like having PTSD. You can see that all of us are lovely intelligent human beings. But once you’re homeless, you are affected like it’s war. Because it is war.”

“When I was at the safe house prior to coming to Skid Row, people didn’t believe me when I said I had PTSD. They said, ‘You’re not a veteran!’ I knew I was just holding on by a string, I knew I couldn’t handle a job. When I was filling [out] the paperwork for a jobs program, [a staff member] asked me to answer three questions at the end. The last question was, ‘Were you a victim of domestic violence?’ When I read that question, I just lost it. That’s how I was able to get [mental health] help.”

Participants also shared stories of when they received supportive mental health services, and how that led to finding housing and staying housed.

⁶ The need for more housing is supported by other research. “Homelessness is a Housing Problem: How Structural Factors Explain U.S. Patterns” by Gregg Colburn and Clayton Page Aldern shows that housing market conditions explain the most variation in rates of homelessness. Cities with higher rents and lower rental-vacancy rates see higher per capita rates of homelessness. More [here](#).

“I was a human trafficking victim and homeless. At Covenant House, they had unorthodox processes. They got me a trauma-informed therapist and kept me on their TAY [transition-aged youth] program until my Section 8 came through. That was a really successful process for me.”

“The Department of Mental Health provided me the help I needed to deal with trauma. They also connected me to the People’s Concern Daybreak Women’s Shelter.”

“I was panhandling on the freeway. I couldn’t decide between jumping off the freeway or the train tracks. Finally, a friend of mine said maybe you should go to a hospital. I had to beg them to take me [...] I told the psychiatrist that you don’t want to see a headline in the morning, because this is my only other [recourse]. So, they admitted me for a 72-hour hold. That turned into a six-week stay at a County mental health institution, nine months at a homeless shelter, and then ten years in permanent supportive housing. And I am grateful for all of it because I am not on the freeway.”

Discrimination or mistreatment in case management and services was deeply felt by a handful of participants. Some people shared disturbing accounts of providers and their staff mistreating them. Some shared accounts of case workers dropping them suddenly or being culturally incompetent and racially discriminatory. Such mistreatment led to a failure to get housed or a misdiagnosis for the services they needed.

“I had depression. I wasn’t stabilized on my medication, but case workers didn’t understand. They kept saying I wasn’t being grateful for the resources I was being given.”

“Just because you [outreach and case workers] don’t want to deal with a Black man doesn’t mean that he is crazy. He could be well within his right mind; he could have had trauma response. Improperly diagnosing and categorizing people have left people on the streets.”

2. A lack of centralized leadership, regional planning, and accountability create miscoordination that is strongly felt by those experiencing homelessness

Participants were acutely aware of the fragmented political and programmatic landscapes in Los Angeles County, where 88 cities and the County oversee different services, shelters, and funding streams. There is not one place to go to find answers on homelessness strategies or resources.

One participant shared how members of the unhoused population are sporadically and arbitrarily moved from the streets of one neighborhood to another at the whim of leaders, losing their belongings and their familiarity with a place they called home. One individual noted that it seemed like politicians and providers acted like competitors.

“People on the streets have to leave a certain encampment because of a street cleaning. They get their stuff taken, and then they go somewhere else. So, the homeless can’t even be homeless where they’d been home.”

“We’ve been in a system where it seems to be that everyone is doing their own thing, and we see where that’s gotten us.”

“The joining and alignment of the system is what is so important. I don’t understand why everyone is in the same game, but they don’t act like partners. They act like competition, and that doesn’t help solve homelessness.”

Participants also noted that fragmentation created disparities in access to services and resources. One person shared a positive experience with a shelter in Pasadena where the staff were accommodating, and the area had various resources for food and services. Now housed in Lancaster, he said homeless services were noticeably lacking even though many people have been pushed away from the City of Los Angeles to outlying areas like Lancaster. Individuals living and working in Skid Row said that there were plenty of services and housing there, which have brought unhoused people from other places to Skid Row.

Two other participants had frustrations beyond disparate resources. They cited a lack of accountability in how homelessness funding is disbursed and urged greater funding transparency.

“This is all about the budget and the funding. We need accountability for the money. There is money out there, but it’s not being used as effectively as it could be. Washington is helping with homelessness, there is billions of dollars. But where is that money going?”

“There needs to be governance over how [housing developers] are spending money, to see if they are cutting corners for quality.”

Participants were presented with ideas to improve system governance, including the creation of a new independent entity that would be tasked to do so. They were then asked to rank the most essential functions and authorities for that entity. As shown in Figure 2, participants said the most important authority is to set a regional unified strategy. Participants wanted to address the fragmentation and accountability in the system and see leaders come to the table.

“We need the different leadership—those who are making decisions—to come together in a room and share what’s working in their respective cities. Then we figure out the best strategies together and go from there.”

“I just think it’s important for everyone to get together to understand the information on what’s going on in housing, and to know where to go next.”

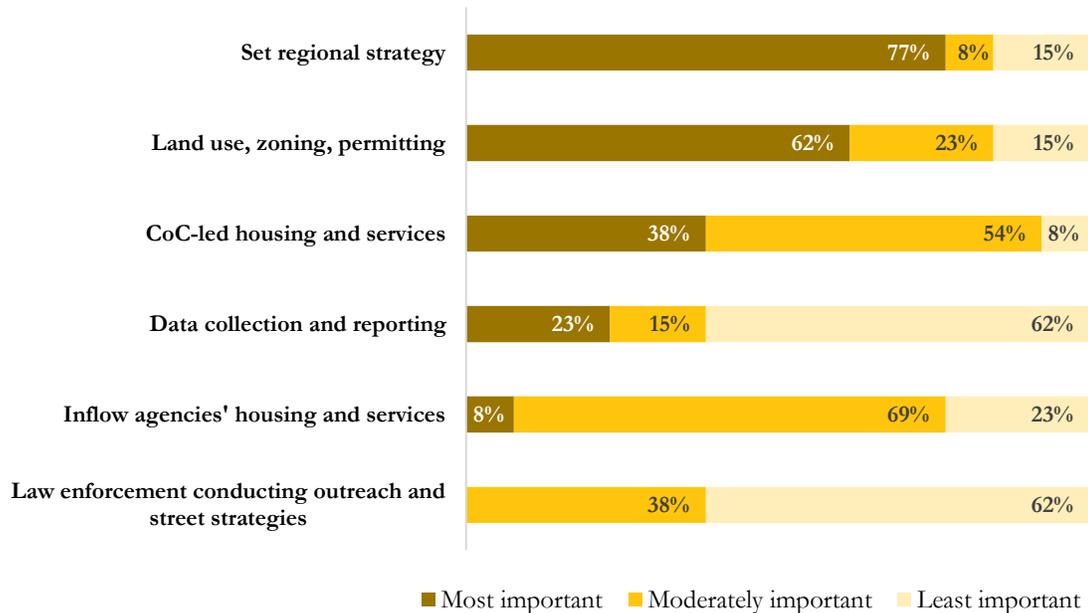
“I definitely think we need a better strategy, to be able to come to the table. We need not to divide, but to come together.”

For some participants, the regional strategy for homelessness was related to authority for land use and zoning reform. They connected the disparity in homeless housing, services, and resources in different Los Angeles areas to disconnected planning and zoning, as participants saw a direct relationship between these issues and the lack of permanent and interim housing.

“Lack of housing is because of NIMBYism⁷. There are people saying, ‘Don’t house them in my neighborhood,’ so [unhoused] people are pushed to Skid Row. But a lot of people don’t want to be forced to come Skid Row, but we can’t build housing anywhere else.”

⁷ NIMBYism (“Not in My Back Yard”) is a phenomenon where existing residents, especially homeowners, oppose denser or affordable housing development and zoning reforms in their neighborhoods, citing concerns of crime, traffic congestion, overcrowded schools, and lowered property values. Read more [here](#).

Figure 2: Setting a unified regional strategy was ranked as the most important authority needed by an independent entity (n per authority = 13)⁸



3. Improved governmental interagency coordination between the County, cities, LAHSA and public agencies is needed to ensure adequate housing supply and holistic wraparound services before, during, and after homelessness

Participants’ insights illustrate both the incredible complexity of homelessness and the ideal processes that might improve how people move through homelessness and into stable, supportive housing. The optimal transition from homelessness to housing would include better information on resources, access to high quality housing and wraparound services, and improved interagency coordination (e.g., through support from caseworkers with familiarity across different agencies and providers).

Before homelessness: Preventing homelessness requires a greater supply of affordable housing and renter protection programs. It also requires more availability of resources, such as financial assistance, food stamps, and healthcare services, and information on where to find them. Participants unanimously shared those preventative resources and services were absent before they became homeless. They also said that greater access to frequently updated information on resources would have been helpful for them to avoid homelessness, or at least street homelessness. Pamphlets, billboards, and call centers could have helped spread this information. A handful shared that their unhoused neighbors themselves were the best sources for information on proper shelters and appropriate programs for individuals. Participants shared stories of how they ended up homeless,

⁸ For this activity, participants were given a list of the six mentioned authorities and asked to rank them in order of importance for a new entity to have influence over, 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important. Participants first shared their rankings and then engaged in a longer conversation about the reasoning behind their choices. In this visual representation, for ease of comprehension, ranks 1-2 were combined as most important, 3-4 as moderately important, and 5-6 as least important. Percentages on the graph denote percent of votes as ‘most important’ for that authority.

some stating that they lost housing due to domestic violence, substance abuse, health issues, or illness or death in their families, and suggested that better coordination among relevant agencies could pull people into stability faster. One participant noted that most popular or known resources were not available for people unless they were homeless, noting a lack in preventative services.

“If I just had some information on how to receive or use food stamps or any kind of monetary resources when I was about to be homeless, that would have been so helpful. I had no idea [about where to go]. I was in a horrible situation.”

“I met someone who was told that they either had to be homeless on the street or in a shelter to access any services. It shows a disparity in services [in prevention].”

“It would be best if DMH [Department of Mental Health], the justice system, the prison system worked together more. If case workers could begin helping people with a housing process and vocational rehab when they are on parole that could be so helpful. If [someone] is homeless, he has a higher chance to go to jail, and he comes out homeless again. It’s becoming a revolving door with thousands of people.”

During homelessness: Participants listed key resources and opportunities that could have been helpful for them as they were navigating homelessness. Most agreed that supportive services before they found permanent housing, such as a transitional housing model in shelters or during encampment outreach, could provide essentials such as food pantries, medical clinics, and addiction counseling for those who most urgently needed it. They also agreed on the expansion of successful voucher programs, such as Housing Choice Vouchers. They advocated for greater availability of these resources. Other practical resources that were recommended include extended bus passes, expanded universal basic income, and jobs programs. Some participants mentioned centralizing and assisting management of paperwork, IDs, and verifications as a key area of need.

“Homelessness is not a 9 to 5, Monday to Friday job. It is seven days a week job. Most of the time I encounter an individual over the weekend in a dire situation and in need of a home, and there is nowhere, there aren’t people there for help.”

“I didn’t receive any services when I became unhoused. Matter of fact, when I became homeless, the CES [Coordinated Entry System] wasn’t even in place. You had to do everything on your own, a lot of footwork running around, applying for different things. There were no supportive services before I became homeless or after the fact.”

“We should talk about the other things that would be so helpful when people sign up for GR [General Relief...] They shouldn’t get one bus pass, but a card for three months to move around and find the resources and housing they need.”

“I started doing case management at HVRP [Homeless Veterans’ Reintegration Program] and it was a successful, expedited process. I housed a female veteran from the street to a unit with furniture in 23 days. I asked my clients their preferences and needs. I custom-made everything, already made out housing application with the kind of voucher [my clients] have and all the information they needed to convince landlords.”

Participants unanimously believed in humane outreach and street strategies, noting that most people would opt to be inside a house rather than outside on a street if given decent options. One

participant said that if a homeless individual looked visibly troubled or ill, then that individual ought to be placed immediately into housing, even without their consent, and be given the services they needed. Some noted that not every individual placed into housing may be in the right state of mind to work on themselves and take advantage of services—that they might continue using substances and/or creating unsafe environments for other residents. They recommended that individuals also receive holistic services for wellbeing, including mental health and substance abuse counselling, as people are housed. A few participants described how specific programs were designed to provide holistic services and housing, and that is what made them so successful. These included TAY-specific programs by DMH, Dept. of Child and Welfare Services, and TAY shelters, where the recipient of the service received essential services, consistent case management, legal services, trauma counseling, and housing from the same set of sources.

Participants shared appreciation for specific shelters where they had good experiences and noted that the quality of shelters were particularly important. Some people shared that the privacy in shelters with single rooms or Tiny Homes felt more welcoming than congregate shelters. One participant shared that she found it particularly helpful that a shelter she was staying in updated their information for resources and support groups that she eventually sought out.

After homelessness: All the focus group participants were once homeless and are now housed, with many in permanent supportive housing (PSH). Participants agreed that housing was important for individuals to find a sense of stability in their lives.

“Housing first is supposed to allow a person to rest, shower, gather their thoughts and in return gain focus and desire to continue to have a safe place inside.”

Strong PSH implementation allows for more individuals to retain housing and not end up back on the street. This includes ongoing maintenance of existing PSH units and improving supportive services. Participants voiced the need for continued maintenance and investment in existing permanent units. They shared distressing stories about permanent supportive housing units where elevators did not work, and property managers did not respond to complaints of theft and substance abuse. Participants also shared that consistent case management and supportive services made them feel less isolated and led to their own successes in staying housed.

“We have residents in my PSH who are still suffering from mental health issues and are still using, but we don’t have any services. The recidivism [back into homelessness] here is bad [...] So, when we have people getting housed, but there are no services to help them, that’s a failure. Those people go back to the streets or to jail.”

“I work in a PSH as a case manager and there are issues with quality and mismatch. We have people in wheelchairs living on the sixth floor and the elevator goes out for months. We believe in harm reduction, but our services are lacking.”

Some participants emphasized the desire for self-sufficiency and the importance of vocational rehabilitation and “life skills” classes such as learning to do groceries, cooking, and laundry, alongside community-building opportunities. One participant shared the fear of losing her housing when looking for jobs due to Area Median Income limitations.⁹ Some individuals said they aspired

⁹ Area Median Income, commonly known as AMI, is the midpoint of a region’s income distribution that identify who are eligible to live in income-restricted and affordable housing units. AMIs in Los Angeles County are defined by the California Department of Housing and Community Development. Read more [here](#).

to move from supportive housing into other apartments but said that it was difficult because Moving On¹⁰ programs were not well advertised or explained.

“I see people end up being evicted, when there is an opportunity to train someone, give them another avenue for tenants. Maybe there should be a back door to reduce recidivism. If the County Court system had a restorative housing program or a community-led board led by people with lived expertise for housing, that could be coupled with enrichment specialists on how to have neighbors, how to do groceries, keep the apartment clean.”

“A lot of people are fearful of getting jobs because they think they will lose their housing; they think that suddenly their housing costs will shoot up.”

4. Compassionate case managers, navigators, and advocates, including those with lived expertise, have successfully navigated participants from street homelessness to stability and deserve ongoing investment

When participants were prompted to reflect on the successes of the system, many mentioned experiences with gratitude for specific caseworkers. Good case managers help provide leadership and coordination that the system otherwise lacks and serve as examples of how a more coordinated system would function. Facing and navigating homelessness was a disorienting process for many of the participants, and they struggled with not knowing what resources were available to assist them. Case managers emerged as crucial information stewards as well as cheerleaders and champions for the participants. The most successful case managers were trauma informed, led with compassion, and stayed in touch with their clients on a consistent basis. Other helpful aids included housing navigators and health navigators.

“The people that came into my life—the social workers—that’s really what worked with the system. I wasn’t easy to deal with, but they put up with me [...] It’s all about the people, the good people, who make things happen.”

“What I see today is that services are given to people by phone numbers and addresses, but they are not connected. It is important to take the time to connect your client to the services that will help them [...] It is very important for people [experiencing homelessness] to be connected to someone who say yes, they will help them.”

“I just turned 22 when I became homeless. They just shut me in [housing], and I felt isolated, depressed, suicidal. But once I established a trusting relationship with a case manager, I started changing. I didn’t have family and I didn’t understand independent living. I think supporters are very important for guiding someone like me. They make you want to work on yourself, and not mess up and end up on the streets again.”

Participants supported further investment into case managers. They recognized that case managers had high turnover rates and faced burnout because of overwhelming caseloads and low wages. Participants also said peer supports and case managers who previously experienced homelessness

¹⁰ Moving On, developed by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), provides tools and strategies to local agencies to assist transitional and permanent supportive housing (PSH) tenants who wish to move to other housing options (e.g., an affordable or market-rate housing unit in a different neighborhood) and as a result create availability in existing PSH. Read more [here](#).

were particularly helpful. Participants stated that peer supports often assume the same responsibilities as case managers and thus deserve the same recognition, training, and pay.

“I think that more money should be invested in those who are doing the footwork. You can’t house people from behind a computer. You can’t house people by calling them here and there. I [as a case worker] would drive 700 to 900 miles a month, from Palmdale or Lancaster to North Hills and Whittier with my clients to cut their gas bills, meeting with them every week. I created a ‘Welcome Home’ kit to make them feel at home—the things you didn’t have when you’re on the street. Little things like that actually mattered and made them feel comfortable. Sometimes I didn’t take breaks or lunch. I treated people like family—my mother, brother, or sister—and by doing that people got housed and retained their housing.”

5. People who have experienced homelessness should have formal roles on the ground and in senior leadership across the system given their expertise

Those who have had to navigate the homelessness system for themselves and those they have helped are well situated to identify ways to improve it. As participants shared the system’s successes, gaps, and possible solutions, it quickly became evident that they were system experts. They highlighted the unique needs of different homeless populations (e.g., the elderly, domestic violence survivors, previously incarcerated individuals). They shared new and innovative ideas to better the lives of those suffering, such as multigenerational supportive housing, restorative housing justice practices, and enrichment activities in shelters and housing such as community cooking events.

“I have had so many experiences where professors and college students have invited me to talk and advocate for this issue. Then they graduate and become homelessness experts. We as those with lived expertise should be labeled and empowered as experts within the system. We cannot be left behind while everyone else is empowered to move forward. That is where the paradigm shift needs to be.”

“Lived experience needs to be at every stage [of a program’s or policy’s process], including the planning stage. Not just at the end to get feedback. There also needs to be variety in the lived experience voices and we need fresh voices too.”

Participants showed a tremendous amount of compassion and gratitude for where they were in life now, and repeatedly shared that they wanted to give back. One participant shared that they feel personally affected when they see dysfunctions in the system, while another shared an account of exposing mismanagement within a homeless service organization they worked in because it went against their belief system.

Many participants, as noted earlier, now work as peer supports, case managers, and advocates at various organizations. They said that as peer supports, they are doing as much work as case managers and so should be paid similarly. They also noted that more representation of people with lived expertise and experience is needed for street outreach, services and housing navigation, and property management. They spoke of new roles that could benefit from their expertise and hold stakeholders in the system accountable.

“Case managers need more lived experience, not just folks with bachelor’s degrees in social work. We were homeless once, and we had to advocate for ourselves. So, we know we can help someone else in a similar position. Case managers fresh out of college have a higher turnover rate.”

“Lived expertise folks care about the people and getting the right services to them. We could form compliance groups that do pop-up audits of service providers and public agencies. Assess and evaluate them as a way of accountability.”

Participants said there were also other opportunities where people with lived experience can contribute their insights and expertise. These included being integrated into regional planning efforts, program development decisions, and roles in property management and affordable housing development.

“In the housing development process, residents can tell them what we need in a unit, instead of them assuming we need these granite counter tops and elaborate things. What we really need is closet space, pantry space, washer/dryer hook-ups because we have children. [In our apartment,] we have a community room that nobody uses, but what if we talked about issues like trash collection, coming together as a community. Maybe [someone with] lived expertise was managing each floor. Maybe [that person] took a conflict resolution role in the community.”

People with lived expertise would like to be positioned and empowered as leaders and decisionmakers. Some participants shared their frustrations with being asked for their stories and suggestions multiple times, but never seeing those suggestions implemented in actual policy designs. Others cited examples of successful integration of people with lived experience, for example in the Measure H campaign and in a Continuum of Care board.

“People with lived experience are not recognized at the top, executive level. We get brought in because people want to just hear our stories. But when it comes to implementation, decisions are made by those who don’t know what it’s like to be homeless [...] How can somebody like that make a decision for someone like me? It has to come from one of us. I can’t have someone who doesn’t even know how to have a conversation with me decide where I get to lay my head at night.”

“Politicians are living with assumptions. They really don’t know [what is happening]. They talk in broad strokes. I would like to see who can go and test what we think could really happen.”

“It’s important for Governor Newsom, Secretary Fudge to have a board of five or six people with lived expertise that they talk to and receive advice from. If you are any entity that has the word housing, mental health, substance abuse, then you need people with lived experience at your table.”

Appropriate supports, such as compensation and policy and advocacy training, should complement integrating and empowering people with lived expertise into homelessness solutions. Participants also advocated for changing workplace cultures so that their insights are taken seriously.

“Nothing about us without us. I also think there is a need to have professional experts [alongside lived experts] for areas that are really complex. I don’t understand very much about zoning laws, building codes, grant funding, intercity legal contracts, union requirements.”

“It can’t be a token position. If someone disagrees with lived expertise, then there should be a conversation and evidence to back up their argument. Even if we don’t speak the same language, we should be in the culture of discussing together.”

“I have always felt like ‘the other.’ I wish we could break down that barrier where we are looked at as ‘the other people’ [...] and instead look at us as assets to their policymaking. We should be taken more seriously.”

“Why will people in positions of power listen to us? There should be some kind of training for them so they can understand where we are coming from, who they are talking to. There needs to be mutual respect at that table.”

6. Data should be reported in real-time and used to improve programs and services

Some participants viewed data collection and reporting as especially important, while others viewed it as not important at all. The biggest force driving unpopularity was the notion that data took great effort to collect but was not being effectively used to design and fund successful programs.

Understandably, participants had a ready-for-action attitude and felt like data collection gets in the way of action. At the same time, participants expressed a clear desire for funding accountability and for audits of programs and case managers to understand how the system is working, which could be answered by monitoring local system performance metrics. Participants shared that more real-time data would benefit both leaders when designing strategies and programs and case workers and the unhoused population to know the exact shelter or housing unit availabilities.

“Now we’ve got the most data, through COVID, through Project Roomkey. My idea is [to] simply subtract the services and programs that don’t work.”

“As important as data is, spending so much time with data, self-audit, peer audits, isn’t changing the circumstances of homes and services enough.”

“Data collection is the most important authority to think about [...] Continued data collection with adjustments and re-adjustments to the regional strategy and planning is really important.”

7. An improved public narrative about people who experience homelessness can strengthen the ongoing and future efforts to combat homelessness in Los Angeles

Participants suggested instituting more aggressive messaging to inform both housed and unhoused residents on the state of homelessness in Los Angeles. One participant said that improvements and wins in the system, such as “X amount of people housed by month,” could be better reported so that people do not lose faith in what is working. Participants commented that the successes of strategies like availability of services while homeless or regional zoning reforms are linked to the public perception of homelessness, which still has room for improvement.

“That we are not all drug addicts, that we are not all mentally ill, that we all don’t want to stay homeless, and that we are not all stupid [...] That we are people, we are survivors who are going to make it.”

“There is still a huge stigma around homelessness. When I hear people talk really negative things about being homelessness, I tell them that I’ve been through it too, that it isn’t for any of those reasons they think. It was due to a loss of a family member.”

“Regular people like to pathologize folks who are struggling. But I like to say that it’s not what’s wrong with people who are homeless, but it’s what’s happened to us. If anyone were to go through certain experiences, they would also find themselves in our situation. Instead of pathologizing people who are suffering, they should think about the cracks in the system that people fall through. That’s what needs to be under the microscope.”

“We need a dominating campaign concerning the stigma as well as barriers that block folks like us from moving on.”