TITANS THINKING TOGETHER PRESENTS:

Research Report of Pilot Qualitative Data Collection, Summer 2024

Housing Cluster

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Text by Ms. Stephanie Jeffcoat and Dr. Jon Bruschke. This work is the product of a group effort and credit for the final work should be shared by the entire working group. Ms. Jeffcoat and Dr. Bruschke are responsible for the conclusions presented here.

Introduction

Titans Thinking Together (T^3) is an initiative of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) designed to encourage cross-disciplinary work on a common problem. The Colleges of Communications, Engineering and Computer Science, and Health and Human Development (listed alphabetically) have come together under the T^3 auspices to work on the housing crisis in California. A series of meetings have resulted in a White Paper (see Appendix A) outlining general directions, and part of that project was a pilot study that involved qualitative data collection in the summer of 2024. In order to ensure that the voices of the unhoused themselves animated the work of the group, the initial interviews were with unhoused people in the Fullerton/Anaheim area to collect their perceptions on the sort of programming that might put those without housing on a pathway to a permanent living situation.

Overview and Research Questions

While quantitative research seeks to collect objective data to make inferential conclusions about populations based on samples, qualitative work seeks to provide depth to concepts by giving each research participant the ability to elaborate on key issues and core ideas in order to provide a rich description of the factors that come into play. A quantitative survey, for instance, provides a common set of questions and restricts answers to a limited and standard set of responses, frequently a numeric indication on a Likert-type scale (or something similar). In contrast, a qualitative study provides a set of open-ended questions and allows the researcher to probe answers and the respondent to follow-up and elaborate in directions that they see as important. It is the perspective of this research group that each methodological approach contains value and can help provide insight on different sets of questions as well as provide different perspectives on the same group of questions.

One crucial difference that separates quantitative from qualitative approaches is the orientation toward subjectivity. Quantitative research seeks to be objective, although all human thought involves a healthy degree of subjectivity and there are a number of subjective choices that quantitative scholars make in the wording of their survey questions, their analytical tools, and their data interpretation. While quantitative research is thus never fully objective, researchers from this standpoint strive to minimize personal interpretations in the research design.

Qualitative research, in contrast, embraces the subjectivity inherent in an interview and attempts to lay bare the history, social location, and experience of the interview. An interview is a communicative exchange, and as such the meaning of the encounter is co-created by the interviewer and the respondent. Qualitative researchers maintain that being transparent about their social location and their own subjective experiences can help readers better understand the responses and that transparency about personal perspectives creates a more inclusive form of data collection. The more ethnographic the researcher's orientation, the more subjective experiences become part of the research findings, and the more the researcher's own subjective perspective becomes part of the report. Here, we seek to be transparent about the researcher background and experience to inform understandings of how the data collection went as it did, to enrich the research conclusions, and to improve future research. Within those bounds, this is not a full autobiographical ethnography, and we wish to foreground the perspectives of the unhoused respondents.

The purpose of the pilot study was to discover the causes of homelessness, the efficacy of different sorts of interventions and services, and what the

unhoused perceive as the services they need to find stable housing.

We maintain that all knowledge comes from some perspective, and there are certainly many different social locations from which data might be collected, including at least that of residents, service providers, law enforcement and citizens with housing. The information collected was designed to reflect the perspective of those who are unhoused, and for a full understanding of the issue this information should be collected and integrated with, and compared to, that obtained from other perspectives.

Methods

The two field researchers included Dr. Jon Bruschke, a white male, who has held a professorship since 1999, been involved in academic work since 1988, and has never been without housing. The second researcher was Stephanie Jeffcoat, a recent B.A. recipient with an African-American female identity who was without housing for several years and experienced an even longer stint with addiction. Ms. Jeffocat also works extensively in organizations for the formerly unhoused and formerly incarcerated, and her contacts in those organizations allow her to have access to a number of resources for unhoused individuals. Her complete story is contained in Appendix B.

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, and notifying and receiving the support of the Fullerton Police Department, the researchers approached unhoused individuals in the Fullerton/Anaheim area. Data were collected in June, 2024, a period where temperatures were very hot.

Once it was determined that the approached individuals were unhoused, the researchers described the study and were read an informed consent form, which was sometimes adapted to plain language for clarity and brevity. After the informed consent information had been provided, the researcher asked the individuals if they agreed to participate. Those individuals who provided verbal consent were asked if they further agreed to be recorded. Those who agreed were asked to state their consent into the audio recorder, and the interview was initiated. For those who declined the recording, the researchers took field notes lieu of recording. All those approached were offered a snack bag and water supplied by Ms. Jeffcoat's support agencies; those who agreed to participate in the survey were offered a boxed lunch as well. When the situation became ambiguous, the researchers heavily erred on the side of providing lunch.

Often, those approached were in groups. It was not uncommon for only a single member of the group to participate in the study while others left or lost interest. On multiple occasions possible respondents were offered the box lunch but then withdrew from the study when they were asked if they consented to recording; in all cases they kept the boxed lunch. On some occasions multiple parties received the boxed lunch but only one person remained for the interview. An interview schedule (see Appendix C) was utilized for each interview, although on many occasions the respondent took the interview in a different direction in a way that made some of the questions no longer relevant.

Data collection took place over the course of 5 days between June 18 and June 27, 2024. Ultimately, 62 separate individuals were encountered. Of those, 22 agreed to a recorded interview and 11 agreed to an interview with notes. On three occasions the responses were not coherent enough to constitute answers to questions (see below), resulting in 30 usable interviews.

All electronic recordings were machine transcribed for subsequent analysis. During research meetings the transcripts and field notes were reviewed, and discussion between the researchers produced a series of themes and observations.

Results

Below are listed some of the themes that emerged from the interviews. To be identified as a theme the ideas are either repeated across several interviews or heavily emphasized in a single interview. In the judgment of the researchers, all represent a significant aspect of the experience of the unhoused in Orange County.

Barriers in obtaining documentation. Many respondents lacked the means to acquire essential documents such as social security cards, IDs, or birth certificates. They do not have the financial resources to obtain these documents and have no secure were

place to store their documents once obtained. The documents themselves are frequently stolen. The respondents were oblique in making the connections, but without access to documents they have difficulty accessing services.

Obtaining essential documents is a significant hurdle for many unhoused individuals and this challenge has far-reaching consequences. These documents are often prerequisites for accessing basic services, securing employment, enrolling in programs, and applying for housing. However, the process of obtaining or replacing them can be prohibitively difficult for people experiencing homelessness, creating a vicious cycle that keeps them from regaining stability.

One of the key barriers is the cost associated with obtaining these documents. Fees for replacing a lost ID, acquiring a copy of a birth certificate, or applying for a social security card may seem manageable for some, but for unhoused individuals—many of whom are struggling with limited financial resources—these costs can be overwhelming. This is particularly true when someone has no steady income or is directing what little money they have towards meeting immediate survival needs, such as food or temporary shelter. In such situations, the costs associated with obtaining documentation often fall to the bottom of the priority list.

In addition to financial obstacles, the lack of a secure place to store personal belongings further complicates the situation. Many unhoused individuals experience frequent theft or loss of their possessions, particularly when forced to move between different locations or shelters. Important documents, once acquired, may be stolen, lost, or damaged, forcing individuals to start the lengthy and expensive process all over again. Without a secure location to keep these critical documents, it becomes nearly impossible to maintain them long enough to leverage them for securing housing, employment, or services.

Moreover, the bureaucratic processes involved in obtaining these documents can be complex, time-consuming, and geographically inaccessible. Unhoused individuals often lack the means to travel to government offices or face logistical challenges, such as unreliable transportation, to complete the the necessary paperwork. Even when individuals are able to apply for these to apply for these documents, they may struggle to receive them if they lack a permanent address where the documents can be mailed. This lack of a stable mailing address is yet another barrier that prevents unhoused people from obtaining the very documents they need to access the services that could help them transition out of this situation.

The importance of support systems and relationships. For many, a serious disruption in initial family relationships, or dysfunctional family relationships, was a significant contributing factor to losing housing in the first place. For instance, several expressed that they had been kicked out of their house by a parent or relative. Equally importantly, a number of the unhoused maintain significant and important relationships. In one instance, we encountered a father and son who were living on the street together. Another pair was a younger male and an older female who seemed to have a close nephew-aunt type relationship (they were not related by blood or romantically involved) but both expressed a strong connection and deep love for one another. Many of those interviewed maintain important and often loving relationships with other unhoused people.

For many, being separated from loved ones, especially in programs, is a significant concern and often a "deal-breaker" for entering services. Thus, a program that waccepts males but not females requires couples to split in order to access services, and given this choice many of the unhoused choose their relationships over services. In our view, this is often a rational choice. A supportive relationship with another unhoused person is not only crucial to survival but also emotional well-being, while the benefits of any service are usually limited and short-lived. Additionally, there is the emotional anguish of being separate from a loved one, especially when that loved one is under duress.

A preference for independent living. There is a strong preference for programs that support independent living rather than traditional shelter models. Motel accommodations are viewed more favorably than shelters. Some expressed disappointment with the limited lifespan of programs like Project Roomkey;

the general feeling was that the program was really working well for them while they were housed, but they had nowhere to go when the program expired.

Many individuals expressed a strong preference for securing their own apartments rather than staying in shelters. They articulated a desire to bypass the shelter system altogether and move directly into stable housing. The consensus was that living in a shelter is a temporary and often undesirable solution. The waiting period for permanent housing is frequently viewed as an anxious and frustrating experience, with many believing that an independent apartment would provide a more stable and dignified living environment. The hope is that by transitioning directly into their own homes, they can avoid the difficulties associated with shelter living and establish a more secure and self-sufficient life.

Lack of Awareness, Misinformation and Reliance on Word-of-Mouth channels. Information about available services is not widely accessible. Most of those interviewed had access to smartphones, but the availability of housing support services was generally a mystery. A few respondents could articulate and clearly name several programs they had accessed, such as general relief, Project Roomkey, or Section 8. More typically, some would say "I have no idea how to start." Some could name a specific program, such as a YMCA showering location, or a specific shelter, but not name shelters or housing programs.

By contrast, word of mouth is by a wide margin the most important way services are discovered and evaluated. The voices of other unhoused have the most influence; service providers face trust gaps the unhoused have for officials, law enforcement, and social service providers. One pair of respondents clearly articulated that the way to make a program work was to have some unhoused people share positive experiences with others while on the streets, and they identified other unhoused people as the most reliable and trusted source of information.

Some unhoused believe that at least some service providers turn the unhoused over to police for the enforcement of warrants (we were unable to determine whether these allegations were true, but they were genuinely believed, and they seem plausible). For some, our affiliation with CSU Fullerton seemed to be a point of pride and they enjoyed being part of a university study. For others, any affiliation with any official institution was viewed with suspicion. One very coherent respondent asked "are you legit?" and wanted to know if we worked for the police. This was a significant barrier in obtaining signatures on IRB forms (although we are very comfortable that all interviews were fully voluntary.)

There was virtually no awareness of recent statewide ballot initiatives or county-wide programming, although some could name CityNet as a key gatekeeper or the "Hub" shelter. There was little use of the various county websites that might provide information on different programs, or how to reserve a bed.

Range of ability to respond. Some respondents were having obvious mental difficulties or were chemically impaired, and could not respond to questions in ways that indicated that they even understood the queries. Some could respond coherently but had fantastical stories about their circumstances, how they had become homeless, and whether they might access services. Some could respond to our questions but would not be able to fill out paperwork, provide detailed information about themselves, or be able to provide vital documents. Finally, some were able to speak in detail about their current status, had multiple applications for housing in process, could name case workers, and knew when and where they had last accessed services (for instance, when they last received and were next eligible for general relief).

Hopelessness. There are very few role models of people who have successfully gotten off the streets. Very few respondents spoke about someone they knew who had entered a program and ultimately arrived at a permanent housing solution. In our opinion, this significantly reduces motivation to pursue programs. Many respondents had entered programs only to have them stall out for one reason or another, and all knew many others who had accessed some sort of service but returned to the streets. A personal loss of hope appears to be a major contributing factor that inhibits the motivation to enter services.

Varied and generally negative views of shelters. Ms. Jeffcoat found that many people did not share her own view of the shelters. One of the most pressing

concerns for many unhoused individuals is the search for a safe place to sleep. Safety is a fundamental need, yet many find it elusive. Shelters, which are often considered a primary refuge, were frequently avoided by respondents due to negative experiences. Interviewees reported instances of abuse, theft, and harshly enforced rules within shelter environments. The fear of being harmed or stolen from, combined with descriptions of harsh disciplinary measures, makes shelters a less attractive option. Some individuals have reported incidents where shelters were perceived to be no different from jails, where staff acted abusively and rules were demeaning. The constant concern for safety leads many to prefer sleeping in less secure but more familiar locations on the streets despite the multiform risks.

Many of the individuals expressed that the shelters were dehumanizing and that the interactions with staff are marked by a lack of respect and empathy. There is also a common belief that shelters collaborate with law enforcement, leading to arrests upon release. This perception adds to the reluctance to seek shelter services, reinforcing a cycle of distrust and avoidance. For those who have never experienced life in a shelter themselves, their perceptions are often shaped by second-hand accounts and assumptions, which they accept as accurate without firsthand knowledge.

A related phenomena is that drug treatment programs often fail, and that dealers wait outside the facilities to tempt those who are released, or that the fellow patients become net-negative influences on sobriety once both parties are out of the treatment facility.

Feelings of dehumanization and poor treatment from other citizens. The societal perception of unhoused individuals plays a significant role in their marginalization and exclusion. The term "homeless" is often seen as derogatory, reflecting a broader societal disregard and lack of empathy for those without housing. This label carries a stigma that contributes to the dehumanization of individuals without stable housing, reinforcing negative stereotypes and prejudices. This is not to say that in all contexts every use of the term is inappropriate or harmful, but those without housing find the reduction of their identity to "homeless" to be a dehumanizing experience.

Unhoused individuals frequently face demeaning treatment from others, which undermines their self-esteem and complicates their interactions with society. They are often subjected to judgment and discrimination, which exacerbates their struggles and reinforces their sense of alienation. The societal tendency to overlook or dismiss the harsh realities they face—such as abuse, discrimination, and systemic barriers—further compounds their marginalization. Often the unhoused are blamed for all the hardships they face.

This stigma is not only an emotional burden but also a practical obstacle. Many unhoused individuals feel that their experiences and needs are misunderstood or ignored by the broader public. The lack of compassion and understanding leads to heightened frustration and an enhanced sense of invisibility, as if their struggles are insignificant or irrelevant. This broader societal indifference serves to isolate them further, making it even more challenging to address their needs and improve their circumstances.

Bureaucratic barriers. Accessing services and programs intended to support unhoused individuals frequently involves navigating a complex, lengthy, and often frustrating process. Many of these programs are perceived as unhelpful or even detrimental due to several systemic issues.

One major challenge is the extensive and cumbersome paperwork required to access services. The process often involves filling out numerous forms and undergoing lengthy eligibility checks, which can be overwhelming and discouraging for those already struggling with instability. Additionally, many programs mandate invasive background checks, which can exacerbate feelings of distrust and fear among unhoused individuals. The requirement to disclose sensitive personal information, including past legal issues or financial difficulties, raises concerns that such details could be used against them, leading to potential discrimination or legal repercussions.

This apprehension is compounded by the perception that these programs are not designed with their best interests in mind. Unhoused individuals may feel that the application processes are more about scrutinizing and judging them rather than providing genuine support. Experiences of abuse, disrespect, or indifference from program staff further erode trust and deter engagement. When interactions with service providers are marked by a lack of empathy or
The loss of crucial benefits like disability and social

understanding, it reinforces a sense of exclusion and reinforces the belief that the system is rigged against them. Many indicated that they had been excluded from programs due to information they provided (such as a prior criminal history, or assault allegation within a facility).

We note that the respondents were remarkably forthcoming about their own level of blame in these circumstances; they would often freely discuss that they had committed serious crimes (such as murder) or that they had instigated a physical fight in a facility. Frequently they would minimize or contextualize their own level of culpability in the event, but few declared themselves to be fully blameless. The overall sense was not that they had done nothing wrong, but that the bureaucratic response (often being permanently barred from a facility) was overly broad.
Moreover, the bureaucratic nature of these services often results in delays and inefficiencies, leaving individuals in urgent need of assistance feeling unsupported and neglected. This disillusionment with the support system can lead to a cycle of exclusion and disenfranchisement, where individuals become increasingly reluctant to seek help, further isolating themselves from potential sources of aid and perpetuating their struggle with homelessness.

Overall, these barriers create a significant obstacle for unhoused individuals trying to access the help they need, underscoring the need for reforms that streamline processes, build trust, and ensure that support systems are genuinely responsive to their needs.

Mental and physical health Barriers. Mental health challenges are widespread and present a barrier to accessing services. Many unhoused individuals experience conditions such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use disorders, which are often exacerbated by the trauma of homelessness. The instability of living on the streets or in temporary shelters, combined with the stress of daily survival, can lead to or worsen mental health conditions. For some, mental health issues are a primary factor in becoming unhoused in the first place, while for others, the experience itself contributes to the onset or intensification of these challenges.

security further complicates their access to medical care. These benefits often serve as a lifeline, providing the financial means for ongoing treatment and medication. When unhoused individuals lose access to these benefits—whether due to bureaucratic challenges, missed paperwork deadlines, or difficulty maintaining eligibility—it severely impacts their ability to seek and afford necessary care. As a result, they may be forced to delay treatment, forgo medications, or rely on emergency services, which are ill-suited for managing chronic conditions.

The combined lack of healthcare, benefits, and housing creates a vicious cycle. Unaddressed health issues can make it harder for unhoused individuals to regain stability, pursue employment, or access services, while being unhoused continues to deteriorate their physical and mental well-being. Addressing this cycle requires a coordinated approach that integrates stable housing with access to medical care, mental health services, and benefits restoration, so that individuals can have the foundation they need to begin improving their overall well-being

Lack of access to basic amenities. A considerable area of concern was lack of access services for basic human functions such as bathrooms, showers, and charging stations. The lack of these essential services significantly impacts the daily lives of unhoused individuals, affecting not only their physical well-being but also their sense of dignity, and ability to perform routine tasks necessary for survival. Many individuals expressed that they were unaware of places where they could access showers, food, or free laundry services. Even when they were aware of such locations, they often faced challenges in reaching them due to logistical barriers.

The absence of access to bathrooms and showers leads to severe challenges in maintaining personal hygiene, which is crucial for both physical health and self-esteem. Without regular access to clean facilities, unhoused individuals are at increased risk of infections, skin conditions, and illnesses caused by poor sanitation. In particular, the inability to use a restroom when needed or to wash regularly contributes to a range of health problems, including urinary tract infections, gastrointestinal diseases, and the spread of contagious skin conditions like scabies. Furthermore, the lack of hygiene facilities often makes

about finding permanent housing. When asked, they focused on immediate needs.

Finally, a very important observation was that the unhoused exist in a widely varying range of self-efficacy and motivational states such that no single program is likely to address the needs for a majority of unhoused people, simply because there is no specific need that is is present for the majority of the unhoused. Some need significant medical care, other major mental health interventions, some have jobs and simply need a means for converting their modest wages into stable housing, some are unable even to respond to basic questions. Some are friendly and engaging, some rant incoherently with rage. The services necessary to move from being unhoused to having a permanent indoor residence vary as widely as the individuals. The only real common-denominator was a "housing first" approach.

The ideology of social Darwinism and extreme individualism. There is no doubt that the United States is an individualistic culture; failure to thrive is often attributed to personal rather than structural causes. Individuals are expected to succeed on the basis of their own grit, and those facing disadvantage are presented with a number of narratives to show that any hardship can be overcome. It is our perspective that, as with all orientations, there is value in such a viewpoint but that taken to an extreme it becomes untenable. And this is evident in the different approaches to, for example, differences in addiction recovery programs available to the very wealthy and the very destitute. Programs available for the wealthy almost seem like luxury vacations, and there is a clear belief that the sufferer requires assistance and care to recover. Alternatively, those without resources face a daunting array of applications to get access to any service they are not personally paying for, and the assumption is that hitting "rock bottom" and exerting personal initiative are the key factors in recovery.

When this viewpoint is applied to housing, it is clear that society views it as a very great transgression when someone might be able to access a service that they are not eligible for. So great, that if denying such relief results in a human being spending extended time unprotected on the street that is viewed as a necessary, even acceptable, and perhaps desirable result. The scales are very clearly tipped in the balance "allow no unauthorized services" when compared to "make sure the basic needs of all citizens are met."

This ideological orientation serves as the backdrop and motivating factor to a series of bureaucratic barriers the unhoused face when trying to access services.

Policy Implications

It is possible, within current systems, for some people to overcome all obstacles and regain a happy and successful life. Ms. Jeffcoat is proof of that, and there are many stories of others. Such people, however, constitute a minority. A common theme is that unhoused people must hit "rock bottom" and make a firm decision that they want to change. For such people, who approach their situation with extreme determination, it is possible to find a combined array of services that lead to a reversal of life circumstances.

But such a system will not meaningfully address the housing crisis as a whole. Even those who hit "rock bottom" and successfully change their lives languish, often for years if not decades. For the vast majority of the unhoused, the moment of reversal never arrives. Some face mental and physical challenges that exceed all available support services, or at least, make the already small odds of life change even more remote.

While reaching these conclusions, we are cognizant that there are many instances of unhoused people who are entered into service systems and drop out because they simply "aren't ready" to take on the challenge of reversing a life of addiction and squalor. They have not for themselves reached the conclusion that they must exert massive effort to change their lives, or due to some combination of mental health challenge, personal damage, or hopelessness, drop out of programs that are provided for them.

The legacy of Cartesian approaches treats the circumstances of the unhoused as essentially a bureaucratic sorting problem: Different people have different needs, and we must match those in need to the programs that are there to help them. Within this framework, much can be done to close the gaps where they exist. Often the program someone needs they are not eligible for, or the program has no space, or what is truly needed is a combination of services that the system is not designed to even identify, much less provide.

Thus, a very common situation is one where an intake worker will take (another) assessment of needs and try to match the person with available services. The result is rarely a perfect match, the unhoused person drops out of the programs or benefits from it until their eligibility expires, and while temporarily better off they ultimately return to the streets. We maintain that a large part of this cycle is fundamentally an identity question, where helping someone overcome their hopelessness and marginalization is a key component of helping them navigate the often Byzantine array of services available.

Undoubtedly, more resources and expanded eligibility, and more and better services for those with characteristics that disqualify them from extant services (such as a criminal record), would go a long way to helping the overall situation. One very commonly identified problem was robbery and theft at shelters; secure facilities at shelters would solve this element of the problem. Another was that entry to drug rehabilitation programs introduced them to other drug users, who in turn encouraged rather than discouraged drug use. Better security and tracking would help.

There is also no doubt that permanent supportive housing is the gold standard for interventions; for all interviews we conducted such a program would have had obvious benefits. The only significant limitation of this approach is lack of available slots, and this can be solved by resources (and zoning reforms that help with the permissions and locations).

But beyond that, interventions that address hopelessness, that preserve positive social relationships, that address the constant dehumanization and stress of living on the street, could vastly improve the success of existing programs. We wonder if something like the "alcoholics anonymous" approach might help – people with similar experiences discuss their own failings with others, who then serve as a support group that fundamentally assist the unhoused in rebuilding their identity as a key component of the recovery process. Alternatively, more programs that simply allowed the unhoused to gather and do something meaningful and enriching could conceivably address the identity components of homelessness. This, in turn, we think think we very much facilitate the efficacy of other support programs.

Our conclusions are quite preliminary, but we do think that if questions of re-constructing a positive identity pervaded the service provider system it would do much to make those services more successful. When social workers, law enforcement officers, citizens, and other service providers treat the unhoused as valuable human beings with real potential that can help the unhoused believe that a better future is possible. In contrast, negative encounters with police officers, demeaning experiences in shelters, and political statements that treat the unhoused as flawed creatures who are a threat to others tend to exacerbate the identities that prevent people without housing from self-actualizing in a way that allows them to use services successfully.

We do not feel at present that we have enough information to make more specific recommendations, but we do feel that a commitment to addressing identity concerns need to be central to, and integrated with, service providing. Such a commitment needs to go beyond training for service providers and law enforcement, and needs to be an ethic that pervades the system.

it difficult for individuals to care for chronic medical conditions that require cleanliness, such as wound care or diabetes management, thus worsening their overall health.

Access to phone charging is another significant challenge for unhoused individuals. Many shared that their phones are frequently stolen, which not only makes it difficult for agencies they are registered with to contact them but also adds to their sense of vulnerability and isolation. Having a phone is crucial for staying connected, managing appointments, accessing emergency services, and maintaining any semblance of stability in their chaotic lives. Without a reliable way to keep their phones charged and secure, they face even greater obstacles in navigating daily challenges and improving their situations.

Income and employment challenges. Many unhoused individuals find themselves caught in a frustrating paradox: despite having some form of income or employment, they are still unable to secure stable housing. This situation reveals a deeper, systemic issue that extends beyond the individual level. The disconnect between income levels and the availability of affordable housing highlights the growing disparity between what people earn and what they need to pay for even basic shelter.

Additionally, the high cost of rent, coupled with expenses like security deposits, credit and background checks, and application fees, creates insurmountable financial barriers for many. Unhoused individuals may have a steady income, but it is often not enough to cover the upfront costs required to secure a rental property, especially when landlords demand higher deposits from those with poor credit or unstable housing histories. This situation traps many in a cycle where, despite their best efforts, they remain unable to transition into stable housing.

To address this systemic issue, there is an urgent need for policies that better align income levels with housing costs. This includes increasing the availability of affordable housing, expanding housing subsidies, providing rent assistance, and ensuring that the working poor have access to housing that reflects their earnings. Without such measures, many will continue to face the frustrating reality of being employed yet still unable to achieve housing stability, perpetuating the cycle of homelessness despite their best efforts to overcome it.

Encounters with law enforcement. Almost all respondents had some significant encounters with law enforcement, in ways of varied valence and at various stages of being unhoused. First, many identified a significant law enforcement encounter at the beginning of their loss of housing. Several respondents had committed murder or other serious felonies, which led to the loss of housing. Once released, the criminal record precluded many from accessing services. Some had been removed from shelters or housing due to criminal activities. Few insisted they were innocent of the allegations, and a number were very forthcoming about their criminal behavior.

Second, many noted that they had both good and bad encounters with police officers, and this was generally attributed to the officers being either good or bad cops. For some respondents (see Ms. Jeffcoat's experiences in Appendix B) there were positive experiences with some officers, who were credited for a reversal of fortune. Some respondents were simply grateful for the interventions of the good officers. Some felt there were differences by jurisdiction. One, for instance, felt the Fullerton PD was only interested in clearing out the homeless and not in helping them. Some harbored clear resentments toward law enforcement.

Third, few viewed law enforcement as guarantors of their safety, and almost none felt they could report crimes (usually personal assault) to the police. Some felt the police were another threat to their safety. As noted previously, many felt unsafe while on the streets, and the police were not seen as a government entity interested in, or capable of, securing safety and order amongst the unhoused.

Conclusions

The original purpose of this paper was: "to discover the causes of homelessness, the efficacy of different sorts of interventions and services, and what the unhoused perceive as the services they need to find stable housing." During the course of the interviews a fourth content area emerged, namely, the various challenges the homeless face.

Causes of homelessness. As a general rule, we observed that permanent loss of housing occurs when those who are most vulnerable and live at the

margins of society experience some significantly negative life event. Lacking resources to absorb the consequences of the event, they find themselves on the street. The negative event might be getting kicked out of a house, or becoming addicted, or committing a crime and being incarcerated, or being evicted, or simply having the rent go up to an unsustainable level. Being at the margins generally means there are not strong social support networks in place, such as family or close friends, and a lack of economic resources.

We note that other research has simply shown that as the cost of housing increases there is a linear increase in homelessness (UC San Francisco), and an overall shortfall in housing space relative to the population is a major factor. We again reiterate that such questions are important but are outside the set of questions this study pursued, and a complete picture combines the research findings from multiple perspectives.

Challenges of the unhoused. The unhoused face a number of difficulties. The most obvious is a need for basic amenities, including shelter, food, electricity, showers, etc. But beyond that, there are a number of extreme pressures placed on the unhoused that would challenge any human of any constitution. The first is safety, and almost all respondents lived under constant threat of assault and robbery. A second is dehumanization, both by housed citizens and the police, but also service providers, including shelter operators. While not all housed people dehumanize the unhoused, and not all police and service providers treat the unhoused with belligerence, all unhoused feel they have been treated as sub-human at some point. Third, substance abuse is rampant. It is Ms. Jeffcoat's observation that virtually all the unhoused use controlled substances as a coping mechanism. It does not appear possible to separate questions of substance abuse and addiction from questions of housing and causality appears to be bidirectional. These pressures together make it very difficult to access services when they are available.

Ms. Jeffcoat noticed a pervasive attitude of hopelessness that de-motivates the unhoused from seeking services. A related issue is the large number of failed attempts at change. Many reported repeated attempts at sobriety, and most had attempted to access a shelter or some program. There are very few observable instances of people who have successfully gotten off the street, and this combined with the word of mouth as the primary communication channel discourages attempts at significant life changes.

In short, the difficulty of getting through each hour of each day encourages substance use for short-term relief and discourages the exertion of the significant energy necessary to confront addiction and economic marginalization. This combined with a lack of role models and no clear roadmap for success makes it very difficult to re-enter mainstream society. Thus we note that for those who become unhoused identity is a key factor in their ability to access and successfully utilize the services that are available.

Efficacy of different interventions and services. Generally, there was a strong preference for individual housing, permanent or temporary, over shelters. One respondent, when asked whether he would prefer a motel room to a shelter, simply said "wouldn't anybody?" Of those able to name programs that had value, operations like project RoomKey or section 8 housing seem most effective.

Beyond that, most services seemed to be viewed as simply one of the array of strategies to deal with the challenges of the day – including panhandling, drug use, pooling resources with friends, etc. There was not a strong sense that less-expensive interventions would lead to permanent housing, nor that one made the transition in an orderly fashion, from, say, a foot kitchen, to a shelter, to a rehabilitation program, to a permanent housing situation.

What the unhoused perceive as necessary to obtain permanent housing. Quite frankly, this seemed to be the wrong question. The unhoused struggled with questions of identity, hopelessness, bureaucracy, and marginalization. To them, these seemed to be the central themes, and not operational questions of specific services that would help. For many, they simply wanted a safe place to sleep and a bathroom, and would articulate these as important resources. This did appear to be a very coherent reaction to immediate circumstances, but it also betrayed a form of learned helplessness/hopelessness where the unhoused were no longer even making plans

APPENDIX A

White Paper
Titans Thinking Together: Homelessness Task Force

Purpose Statement
This project seeks a sustained, multi-year effort to address the housing crisis in Orange County and, in particular, to identify structural barriers to services. We seek to be a regional partner contributing to county-wide efforts by leveraging the university-level expertise and research acumen in understanding the problems, diagnosing causes, and facilitating solutions for unhoused people. In particular, we seek to conduct and annual research study and host an annual, regional conference addressing the issue. The first conference will be convened in the fall of 2025 and seeks to bring together, for scholarly discussion, researchers and practitioners. The keynote presentation will show the work of the research study. This paper outlines the research component of the project.

While existing quantitative research can, for example, identify the number of unhoused people in the county, or identify how many access which resources, we pursue a qualitative study that probes the experiences of the unhoused and helps understand why unhoused people lack a stable means of shelter, what services they have attempted to access or what outreach programs they have been in contact with, and what barriers they continue to face to access supports that can provide stable housing. The first data collection will serve as a pilot study to offer proof-of-concept for the research component of the project.

We view homelessness as a continuum, that includes at least those who facing housing instability, those who lack permanent housing, those who live on the streets, those who have accessed some nonpermanent housing solution, and those who have successfully reacquired permanent and stable housing. One goal of the project is to understand what services the re-housed population was able to access to restoring stable shelter, and what barriers the presently unhoused face in accessing those same resources. A key question is how to stop people at risk of losing housing from progressing along the continuum, and how those unequivocally without stable housing move forward toward re-housing status.

We also seek to understand the ability of the unhoused to access services from a service-recipient perspective. For this reason, we seek to query the experiences of service providers with a similar set of questions for a multi-dimensional understanding of service access possibilities and barriers.

Survey Instruments (draft at present)
These questions are designed to provide a framework for topics of discussion but are primarily designed to elicit a conversation. Ideally the conversation should be directed by the respondent as much as possible; if they frame issues different than the questions presume the interview should follow the lead of the respondent. The goal is an open-ended conversation that answers the core questions: What are the causes of homelessness? What programs have you accessed, and what works and what doesn't? What barriers do you face accessing more services? What services are necessary to help you find stable and permanent housing?

Ongoing Issues
Sampling method: Where and how do we sample? Here are some possibilities:

- Encampments
- Bus stops; churches; farmer's market; other areas unhoused people gather
- Shelters (Yale Navigaton Center; Bridges at Kraemer place; Orange County Rescue Mission
- Programs (Mercy House, Center for Health Neighborhoods, etc.
- Eviction notices
- Those who provide legal or medical help for the unhoused (CAIR-LA, etc.)
- Police homeless liaison officers
- Food kitchens
- Tuffy's basic needs; Calfresh
- Survey CSUF students currently or formerly unhouse

IRB: Find an example of a research project that interviewed unhoused people.

APPENDIX B

Social location statement of Stephanie Jeffcoat

Life's unpredictability is a profound reminder of how quickly circumstances can change. One day, you might feel on top of the world, secure and confident, only to find yourself confronting the harsh reality of sleeping on the streets the very next day. This dramatic shift in fortune can be jarring, and it's a stark illustration of how fragile our stability can be.

For years, I lived a life driven by self-destructive habits and indulgences that ultimately eroded my sense of self and well-being. My existence was characterized by a series of compulsions that seemed to dominate every aspect of my life. I was ensnared by a relentless cycle of addiction that spanned multiple facets of my behavior and desires.

Alcohol was a constant companion, offering a temporary escape from reality but leaving behind a wake of regret and disillusionment. Cigarettes provided brief moments of solace while contributing to a long-term deterioration of my health. Drugs promised a fleeting high, only to drag me deeper into dependency and despair. Gambling consumed my financial resources and emotional stability, perpetuating a cycle of hope and loss. Sex and money became vehicles for momentary gratification, ultimately leaving me feeling emptier and more disconnected.

Each of these addictions, in its own way, played a part in a broader pattern of self-neglect and self-sabotage. They were not isolated issues but interconnected elements of a lifestyle that led me to surrender my values and my sense of self-worth. My life became a quest for instant relief and pleasure, often at the expense of long-term happiness and stability. In retrospect, it feels as though I was trading away pieces of my soul, chasing after fleeting satisfactions while losing touch with my true self.

The journey through these tumultuous years was not just about the struggle against addiction but also about grappling with the profound impact these habits had on my life and identity. The realization of how deeply I had compromised my well-being was both painful and illuminating, marking the beginning of a challenging but ultimately transformative journey toward recovery and self-discovery.

In 2015, I made the difficult decision to move back to California, driven by a deep desire to reconnect with my family and be close to my children once more. At that time, my struggle with addiction remained an ongoing battle, and as a result, my family, concerned for their own well-being, could not offer me a place to stay. This marked the onset of my homelessness, a period characterized by uncertainty and struggle.

With no stable place to live, I was left with the uncomfortable choice of sleeping in my car or staying in hotel rooms when my finances allowed. My situation was precarious, and it quickly became clear that finding stability was going to be a significant challenge. Just two weeks after returning to California, my life took a devastating turn when I became the victim of a sexual assault. The assault resulted in an unplanned pregnancy, compounding my already dire circumstances.

In 2016, I gave birth to my beautiful daughter, Harmony Miracle Faith. However, my joy was short-lived. Shortly after her birth, Child Protective Services intervened, and my daughter was taken into their custody. I vividly remember the heart-wrenching moment when they came to my hospital room, took her from my arms, and informed me that if I wished to see her, I would need to go to the nursery. Leaving the hospital without my baby was an agonizing experience that deepened my struggles with addiction.

The year that followed was marked by a series of arrests. Despite being granted visitation rights to see Harmony four days a week, the reality of my situation meant that no one ever brought her to the jail. The system seemed to use my incarceration as a tool to sever the precious bond between mother and child. Each arrest further shattered my hopes of reuniting with her, and the harsh reality of being separated from her became a relentless source of pain and despair.

The days I spent in jail were filled with thoughts of Harmony growing up without me. The system that was supposed to offer support instead seemed to work against us, creating barriers that felt insurmountable.

The pain of not being able to hold my daughter, to witness her milestones, and to be a part of her life was unbearable. It felt as though the very institutions meant to protect and support us were perpetuating our separation, leaving me with a profound sense of loss and betrayal. I was a mother who had lost her child, punished not only for my own mistakes but also for circumstances that seemed beyond my control.

When Harmony was 13 months old, my parental rights were terminated. I received the notification through a letter sent to my last known address—an address I could no longer access due to my ongoing homelessness and frequent arrests. The letter was a cruel reminder of how the system had already decided my fate and my daughter's future without giving me a fair opportunity to prove my capacity to be a parent.

The decision to terminate my parental rights felt like a harsh formality, as if the system had made its judgment long before and used it to permanently sever my connection with my daughter. This devastating blow pushed me further into despair and made it even harder to escape the cycle of addiction and incarceration. I felt utterly powerless and isolated, trapped in a system that seemed determined to strip away everything I held dear.

In those dark times, the weight of my situation often felt overwhelming. The loss of my parental rights was not merely a legal setback but a profound emotional trauma. It struck at the core of my identity as a mother and highlighted the severe challenges faced by incarcerated parents. My story is a poignant example of the need for compassionate reforms that genuinely consider the best interests of both the parent and the child, and it underscores the importance of creating a support system that fosters rather than fractures family bonds.

As excruciatingly painful as that experience was, it became a pivotal moment that ignited a powerful desire within me to pursue a different path. The loss of my parental rights and the subsequent turmoil fueled a fire in me, driving me to seek change and a new direction in life.

Upon my release from incarceration in 2018, I returned to the streets, finding myself falling deeper into the abyss of addiction. I ended up spending another 9 months living on the streets.

One day, after a particularly intense confrontation with a man who had stolen my bicycle, I found myself in a dire situation. The altercation had escalated, prompting the Anaheim Police Department to respond. The officer dispatched to the scene was someone I knew well—one of the few who had shown consistent compassion and concern for me during my time on the streets.

This officer had frequently visited the area where I was living, often stopping by to check on my well-being. His gestures of kindness and genuine care had left a lasting impression on me. Despite the chaos of the situation, he demonstrated a remarkable level of understanding and grace. After hearing both my side of the story and the man's, he chose not to take either of us to jail, instead opting to diffuse the situation with empathy and restraint.

That day, as the sun began to set, I was left with a haunting sense of vulnerability. The man I had argued with had threatened me, saying that when night fell, I would be in danger. The fear of potential violence was overwhelming, and I spent the entire night anxiously anticipating whether he would follow through on his threat.

The next morning, when the police returned, their presence provided a much-needed sense of relief. The officer's decision to assist rather than punish was a turning point for me. It was an unexpected offer of help that led me to accept the shelter services he recommended. His intervention and the shelter's support became the lifeline I needed to begin the journey toward recovery and stability.

The kindness of that officer, combined with the support from the shelter, marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life. It was a critical moment of change, demonstrating the profound impact that compassion and understanding can have in the lives of those struggling with homelessness and addiction.

Once I arrived at the shelter, I hit the ground running. Within just a month, I had managed to secure crucial documents like my ID, Social Security card, and birth certificate. These documents were not just pieces of paper—they were essential keys to unlocking new opportunities and regaining a sense of normalcy.

I also took immediate steps to rebuild my life by starting to work and attending church regularly. The routine and structure provided by both work and church offered me stability and a renewed sense of purpose. As I began to engage with these new routines, I could visibly see changes unfolding in my life. The sense of transformation was almost tangible, with each day bringing new progress and hope. The shelter became a launchpad for my recovery and personal growth, setting the stage for a remarkable turnaround in my circumstances.

While conducting the interviews I found that many people did not share my same view of the shelters. One of the most pressing concerns for many unhoused individuals is the search for a safe place to sleep. Safety is a fundamental need, yet many find it elusive. Shelters, which are often considered a primary refuge, are frequently avoided due to negative experiences. Interviewees reported instances of abuse, theft, and harshly enforced rules within shelter environments. The fear of being harmed or stolen from, combined with experiences of harsh disciplinary measures, makes shelters a less attractive option. Some individuals have reported incidents where shelters were perceived to be no different from jails, where staff acted abusively and rules were demeaning. The constant concern for safety leads many to prefer sleeping in less secure but more familiar locations on the streets despite the increased risks.

Many of the individuals expressed that the shelters were dehumanizing and that the interactions with staff are marked by a lack of respect and empathy. There is also a common belief that shelters collaborate with law enforcement, leading to arrests upon release. This perception adds to the reluctance to seek shelter services, reinforcing a cycle of distrust and avoidance. For those who have never experienced life in a shelter themselves, their perceptions are often shaped by second-hand accounts and assumptions, which they accept as accurate without firsthand knowledge.

Many individuals expressed a strong preference for securing their own apartments rather than staying in shelters. They articulated a desire to bypass the shelter system altogether and move directly into stable housing. The consensus was that living in a shelter is seen as a temporary and often undesirable solution. The waiting period for permanent housing is frequently viewed as an anxious and frustrating experience, with many believing that an independent apartment would provide a more stable and dignified living environment. The hope is that by transitioning directly into their own homes, they can avoid the difficulties associated with shelter living and establish a more secure and self-sufficient life.

The societal perception of unhoused individuals plays a significant role in their marginalization and exclusion. The term "homeless" is often seen as derogatory, reflecting a broader societal disregard and lack of empathy for those in this situation. This label carries a stigma that contributes to the dehumanization of individuals without stable housing, reinforcing negative stereotypes and prejudices.

Unhoused individuals frequently face demeaning treatment from others, which undermines their self-esteem and complicates their interactions with society. They are often subjected to judgment and discrimination, which exacerbates their struggles and reinforces their sense of alienation. The societal tendency to overlook or dismiss the harsh realities they face—such as abuse, discrimination, and systemic barriers—further compounds their marginalization.

This stigma is not only an emotional burden but also a practical obstacle. Many unhoused individuals feel that their experiences and needs are misunderstood or ignored by the broader public. The lack of compassion and understanding leads to heightened frustration and an enhanced sense of invisibility, as if their struggles are rendered insignificant or irrelevant. This broader societal indifference serves to isolate them further, making it even more challenging to address their needs and improve their circumstances.

Accessing services and programs intended to support unhoused individuals frequently involves navigating a complex and often frustrating process. Many of these programs are perceived as unhelpful or even detrimental due to several systemic issues.

One major challenge is the extensive and cumbersome paperwork required to access services. The process often involves filling out numerous forms and undergoing lengthy eligibility checks, which can

be overwhelming and discouraging for those already struggling with instability. Additionally, many programs mandate invasive background checks, which can exacerbate feelings of distrust and fear among unhoused individuals. The requirement to disclose sensitive personal information, including past legal issues or financial difficulties, raises concerns that such details could be used against them, leading to potential discrimination or legal repercussions.

This apprehension is compounded by the perception that these programs are not designed with their best interests in mind. Unhoused individuals may feel that the application processes are more about scrutinizing and judging them rather than providing genuine support. Experiences of abuse, disrespect, or indifference from program staff further erode trust and deter engagement. When interactions with service providers are marked by a lack of empathy or understanding, it reinforces a sense of exclusion and reinforces the belief that the system is rigged against them.

Moreover, the bureaucratic nature of these services often results in delays and inefficiencies, leaving individuals in urgent need of assistance feeling unsupported and neglected. This disillusionment with the support system can lead to a cycle of exclusion and disenfranchisement, where individuals become increasingly reluctant to seek help, further isolating themselves from potential sources of aid and perpetuating their struggle with homelessness.

Overall, these barriers create a significant obstacle for unhoused individuals trying to access the help they need, underscoring the need for reforms that streamline processes, build trust, and ensure that support systems are genuinely responsive to their needs.

Another thing that was noticed when interviewing people was the mental health issues that many of the people suffered from. Mental health challenges are similarly widespread. Many unhoused individuals experience conditions such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use disorders, which are often exacerbated by the trauma of homelessness. The instability of living on the streets or in temporary shelters, combined with the stress of daily survival, can lead to or worsen mental health conditions. For some, mental health issues are a primary factor in becoming unhoused in the first place, while for others, the experience itself contributes to the onset or intensification of these challenges.

The loss of crucial benefits like disability and social security further complicates their access to medical care. These benefits often serve as a lifeline, providing the financial means for ongoing treatment and medication. When unhoused individuals lose access to these benefits—whether due to bureaucratic challenges, missed paperwork deadlines, or difficulty maintaining eligibility—it severely impacts their ability to seek and afford necessary care. As a result, they may be forced to delay treatment, forgo medications, or rely on emergency services, which are ill-suited for managing chronic conditions.

The combined lack of healthcare, benefits, and housing creates a vicious cycle. Unaddressed health issues can make it harder for unhoused individuals to regain stability, pursue employment, or access services, while being unhoused continues to deteriorate their physical and mental well-being. Addressing this cycle requires a coordinated approach that integrates stable housing with access to medical care, mental health services, and benefits restoration, so that individuals can have the foundation they need to begin improving their overall well-being.

Another issue that came up was access to basic amenities, such as bathrooms, showers, and charging stations. The lack of these essential services significantly impacts the daily lives of unhoused individuals, affecting not only their physical well-being but also their sense of dignity, and ability to perform routine tasks necessary for survival. Many individuals expressed that they were unaware of places where they could access showers, food, or free laundry services. Even when they were aware of such locations, they often faced challenges in reaching them due to logistical barriers.

The absence of access to bathrooms and showers leads to severe challenges in maintaining personal hygiene, which is crucial for both physical health and self-esteem. Without regular access to clean facilities, unhoused individuals are at increased risk of infections, skin conditions, and illnesses caused by poor sanitation. In particular, the inability to use a restroom when needed or to wash regularly contributes to a range of health problems, including urinary tract

infections, gastrointestinal diseases, and the spread of contagious skin conditions like scabies. Furthermore, the lack of hygiene facilities often makes it difficult for individuals to care for chronic medical conditions that require cleanliness, such as wound care or diabetes management, thus worsening their overall health.

Access to phone charging is another significant challenge for unhoused individuals. Many shared that their phones are frequently stolen, which not only makes it difficult for agencies they are registered with to contact them but also adds to their sense of vulnerability and isolation. Having a phone is crucial for staying connected, managing appointments, accessing emergency services, and maintaining any semblance of stability in their chaotic lives. Without a reliable way to keep their phones charged and secure, they face even greater obstacles in navigating daily challenges and improving their situations.

Many unhoused individuals find themselves caught in a frustrating paradox: despite having some form of income or employment, they are still unable to secure stable housing. This situation reveals a deeper, systemic issue that extends beyond the individual level. The disconnect between income levels and the availability of affordable housing highlights the growing disparity between what people earn and what they need to pay for even basic shelter.

Additionally, the high cost of rent, coupled with expenses like security deposits, credit and background checks, and application fees, creates insurmountable financial barriers for many. Unhoused individuals may have a steady income, but it is often not enough to cover the upfront costs required to secure a rental property, especially when landlords demand higher deposits from those with poor credit or unstable housing histories. This situation traps many in a cycle where, despite their best efforts, they remain unable to transition into stable housing.

To address this systemic issue, there is an urgent need for policies that better align income levels with housing costs. This includes increasing the availability of affordable housing, expanding housing subsidies, providing rent assistance, and ensuring that the working poor have access to housing that reflects their earnings. Without such measures, many will continue to face the frustrating reality of being employed yet still unable to achieve housing stability, perpetuating the cycle of homelessness despite their best efforts to overcome it.

Obtaining essential documents—such as social security cards, IDs, and birth certificates—is a significant hurdle for many unhoused individuals, and this challenge has far-reaching consequences. These documents are often prerequisites for accessing basic services, securing employment, enrolling in programs, and even applying for housing. However, the process of obtaining or replacing them can be prohibitively difficult for people experiencing homelessness, creating a vicious cycle that keeps them from regaining stability.

One of the key barriers is the cost associated with obtaining these documents. Fees for replacing a lost ID, acquiring a copy of a birth certificate, or applying for a social security card may seem manageable for some, but for unhoused individuals—many of whom are struggling with limited financial resources—these costs can be overwhelming. This is particularly true when someone has no steady income or is directing what little money they have towards meeting immediate survival needs, such as food or temporary shelter. In such situations, the costs associated with obtaining documentation often fall to the bottom of the priority list.

In addition to financial obstacles, the lack of a secure place to store personal belongings further complicates the situation. Many unhoused individuals experience frequent theft or loss of their possessions, particularly when forced to move between different locations or shelters. Important documents, once acquired, may be stolen, lost, or damaged, forcing individuals to start the lengthy and expensive process all over again. Without a secure location to keep these critical documents, it becomes nearly impossible to maintain them long enough to leverage them for securing housing, employment, or services.

Moreover, the bureaucratic processes involved in obtaining these documents can be complex, time-consuming, and geographically inaccessible. Unhoused individuals often lack the means to travel to government offices or face logistical challenges, such as unreliable transportation, to complete the necessary paperwork. Even when individuals are able to apply for these documents, they may struggle to receive them if they lack a permanent address where the documents can

can be mailed. This lack of a stable mailing address is yet another barrier that prevents unhoused people from obtaining the very documents they need to access the services that could help them transition out of this situation.

The barriers that unhoused individuals face—ranging from lack of basic amenities to bureaucratic hurdles in accessing essential services—are undeniably complex and deeply interconnected. However, with the right approach, they are far from insurmountable. The key lies in creating support systems that are both compassionate and efficient, systems that meet individuals where they are and offer practical solutions tailored to their immediate needs. This includes simplifying the processes to obtain necessary documents, removing unnecessary barriers such as excessive background checks, and ensuring that service providers are trained to interact with empathy and respect. When the system is streamlined and centered around the individual's humanity, it not only becomes easier for people to navigate, but it also fosters a sense of inclusion rather than alienation.

More importantly, reforming these services is about more than just offering resources—it's about restoring dignity to those who have been marginalized by society. A truly effective support system doesn't just aim to fulfill basic needs; it actively works to build trust and empower individuals to regain control of their lives. This means ensuring that every point of contact, from shelters to service providers, operates with an understanding of the trauma and challenges faced by the unhoused. By prioritizing dignity and respect in these interactions, society can begin to repair the deep fractures that lead to exclusion and disenfranchisement. Ultimately, the goal of these reforms should be to uplift people, giving them not just the resources they need to survive, but the opportunities and support they need to thrive and break the cycle of homelessness permanently.

APPENDIX C

Interview schedule

Understanding Unhoused Support From A Grassroots Perspective

Unhoused Informant Interview Guide

Protocol Number: HSR-23-24-272

Interviewer:
Hello, my name is [name] and I am [position, affiliation]. I am conducting interviews for a research study about housing and other services in Orange County and wanted to ask if you'd be willing to participate in a 30-minute interview as part of the study.

I have this document for you that has more information about the purpose of the study. You can look it over or I can read it to you. If you can participate, we have a boxed meal to provide you for your time.

[Provide or read informed consent form.]

Do you have any questions?

[Answer any questions, if any.]

Would you like to participate in this interview or would you prefer not to?

[If **no**, thank for their time and move to next potential respondent. If **yes**, obtain informed consent and proceed with interview.]

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.

I wanted to remind you that your participation today is completely voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any question that I ask.

During our conversation today, I will be asking about your housing situation and different programs that you might have tried to or been in contact with. I want to make sure you understand that I'm not affiliated with any program and I can't offer you any services, although I can provide some contact information if you'd like. Is it OK with you if if I record this conversation?

[If consented to be recorded:]

Before we get start, I'm going to turn on my recorder.

Interviewer: I wanted to start our interview by asking about your current living situation:

1. Can you tell me about how you find a place to stay?

Probe: Where are you living right now?

Probe: Where did you sleep last night?

Probe: Do you have a stable place you can always spend the night and go for a meal or a shower? What can you tell me about it?

Probe: Is there someplace you can occasionally go to spend the night? What can you tell me about it?

Probe: When was the last time you had a stable place you could stay whenever you wanted? What can you tell me about it?
Were you living there with anyone else?

Probe: Can you walk me through the time between when you last had a reliable place to stay and right now? Where have you been staying in the meantime? Are there places that have been better or worse?

Interviewer: *I wanted to ask some questions to help me understand how you came to be in your current situation.*

2. Can you tell me about the events that led you to your current circumstance?

Probe: When was the last time you had a stable or permanent place to live?

Probe: Why did you lose your last stable place to stay? Why can't you go back there now?

Probe: Along the way, have you had any chance to get better housing than you have now? Why didn't you end up there?

Interviewer: *There are different groups and organizations that try to assist people who don't have housing. I'd like to ask you about your experience with those groups.*

3. Can you tell me about your experiences with temporary housing? This can include temporary shelters, short-term housing situations, or other housing provided by an organization that was not permanent.

Probe: How did you find out about the housing?

Probe: Can you describe for me the process of getting a spot in that housing situation?

Probe: What were the conditions like in that housing situation?

Probe: Why did you end up moving out of there?

Probe: Did the shelter give you any options for where to go when you left? What were they?

Probe: In what other temporary housing situations have you stayed at least one night?

Interviewer: *I'd like to talk about programs that are not shelters.*

4. There are some programs that try to help people without a place to stay. The might include providing food, clothes, health or medical care, or other things that you might need while not having stable housing. Please tell me what types of organizes or services you've tried contacting.

Probe: What type of assistance was provided at each organization, if any?

Probe: How helpful was that organization if providing you what you were looking for?

*Follow-up with probes above for each different program, if mentioned by the interviewee.

Probe: Have you ever called 211? What did they say? Did it end up helping you?

Probe: What type of internet sites have you looked at to find help with housing or while you were looking for stable housing?

Interviewer: *We've mainly talked so far about organizations that provide housing or services. I was wondering about any other ways that you find assistance that are not through formal organizations, such as family or friends.*

5. Who are some people, outside of formal organizations, that have provided help to you during your current period of unstable housing?

Probe for: different relationship tapped for help.

Probe for: type and duration of assistance provided, and why it ended.

Probe for: whether assistance was provided willingly or begrudgingly, with or without conditions.

Interviewer: *Going back to different organizations that provide services. Of course, you have to find organizations that provide services before you can use them. So I wanted to ask:*

6. How easy or hard would you say that it is to get the help you are looking for from programs that are supposed to help people without housing?

Probe: What were specific barriers, such as no answer of phone calls, odd hours, lack of or incorrect information.

Probe: What were specific facilitators that made it helpful?

Probe: What would you change about your interaction with these organizations to make it easier for you to get the help that you are looking for?

Interviewer: *Shifting gears a little bit, I'd like to ask you about what programs or services you think might be more helpful.*

7. Can you describe for me the best way that an organization or organizations could really help you get back to a stable living situation?

Probe: There are substance abuse programs, mental health programs, and job training programs. Which ones do you think are important for you?

Probe: What do you think would need to happen in order for you to get to a place with a stable living arrangement?

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