

# Housing Command Centers: An Emergency Response to Homelessness

*By Emily Desmond*

*Additional contributions from Cole Chandler, Emily Collins, and Liam Haggerty*

## Summary

Homelessness is a solvable problem when approached with sustained commitment and investment. In many communities, myriad organizations and departments are addressing various aspects of this complex, multi-faceted challenge. Insufficient coordination and inadequate resources to meet the scale and depth of the challenge have created a broken system. As a result, the re-housing process often moves too slowly or stalls completely, leaving over [274,000 people](#) across the United States sleeping outside on any given night. Cities and local leaders are on the frontlines of this crisis, and they possess the capacity to bring people inside and provide them with tailored support to break the cycle of homelessness.

A Housing Command Center (HCC) is a model used by some localities to tackle this challenge; it applies many of the same disaster response and emergency management practices typically used to support large groups of people abruptly in need of housing. The HCC model enhances coordination between the key players – outreach workers, local government, private landlords, law enforcement, and social service providers – to address people’s specific needs and provide housing as quickly as possible. This tool outlines the steps to build an effective HCC that brings together disparate pieces of the housing and social services ecosystems, leverages existing resources, and organizes a focused emergency response to quickly re-house individuals experiencing homelessness and connect them with needed supportive services.

### *The Challenge this tool solves*

In most communities, the process of accessing permanent housing once homeless is slow, difficult, and disjointed. Individuals and families experiencing homelessness may need to navigate numerous systems and organizations, all of which may have differing eligibility requirements. This can force those experiencing homelessness to waste valuable time navigating complex processes to qualify for aid, and they are still likely to end up on wait lists, especially when housing units may already be in short supply. A “Housing Command Center” or “Housing Central Command” enables people to be re-housed quickly in either transitional or permanent supportive housing through a defined workflow and intentional coordination. The process empowers outreach workers



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*

with the resources, in partnership with the city and housing providers, to match individuals or families with housing units that meet their bespoke needs. HCCs utilize a “[Housing First](#)” approach, prioritizing getting people into housing to enable a base level of stability before addressing other issues related to behavioral health, substance abuse, employment, or other challenges. By examining the homelessness response system comprehensively, HCC leadership can identify bottlenecks and roadblocks and map a smoother, more successful process that keeps all the interested parties around the table.

#### *Types of Communities that could use this tool*

The core elements of this tool could benefit any community when appropriately tailored to local circumstances. An HCC can be most immediately impactful in places with large encampments as ideal implementation starts with concentrating resources, building trust with those experiencing homelessness, testing the system across a wide spectrum of needs, and quickly adjusting and iterating. In Denver and Cleveland, it was critical that the cities had “unit teams” able to find existing vacant units – whether in the private market or in temporary non-congregate shelter options such as hotels or micro communities – so that outreach works could provide housing options as part of their initial engagement with people living in encampments. Nearly every community, small or large, has a dedicated system of government and non-profit organizations in their “Continuum of Care” for homelessness services; a Housing Command Center can work in all of these places by taking a more urgent, systems level approach to how a community organizes around and adapts to its homelessness needs.

#### *Expected Impacts of this tool*

Through this model, communities can achieve “equilibrium” or “[functional zero](#)” homelessness, where the number of people exiting homelessness consistently exceeds the number entering homelessness. When people do experience homelessness it is short-term, making homelessness *rare, brief, and nonrecurring*.

## Background

Homelessness affects communities across the country, from urban to suburban to rural areas, and has worsened as the affordable housing supply has grown increasingly constrained. The number of individuals experiencing homelessness reached a [record high](#) in 2024, with an 18% increase over the previous record set in 2023. [Continuum of Care](#) representatives, who are part of the designated local or regional organization funded through HUD to lead the community-wide response to homelessness, [cite](#) the expiration of eviction moratoria and pandemic rental assistance, increased migration, and natural disasters (such as the Maui wildfires and Hurricane Helene) as significant contributing factors. [HUD’s 2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report](#) revealed



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*

that one in three individuals experiencing homelessness meets HUD’s definition of chronically homeless, reaching an all-time high in the chronically homeless population since data collection began.

The inflow of people entering homelessness shows little sign of slowing. The re-housing process is facing bottlenecks, with shelter systems unable to provide enough support despite [continued increases in the number of shelter beds available](#). According to [HUD’s System Performance Measures](#), the national average length of time homeless ranged from 156 days to 193 days between 2019 and 2023. In 2023, 18.7% of individuals or families who exited permanent housing experienced subsequent returns to homelessness. The shortage of affordable rental housing continues to compound the homelessness crisis, and with shelter spaces in short supply or with [eligibility restrictions](#) that make them inaccessible for some, many people are forced into unsheltered homelessness or unsafe accommodations. Furthermore, funding remains a major challenge for local communities addressing homelessness. Only one in four eligible households receives a Housing Choice Voucher, while rising rental and construction costs have outpaced available resources, meaning that funding streams remain insufficient to address the entirety of the challenge. Furthermore, increasing the affordable housing supply alone would not solve homelessness, as many who experience homelessness require supportive services.

The recent Supreme Court case [City of Grants Pass v. Gloria Johnson](#), which ruled that the City of Grants Pass had the authority to pass laws making it illegal to sleep outside, has elevated the challenges associated with unsheltered homelessness. In the wake of this decision, [over 100 cities](#) have criminalized people sleeping outside, even when they have nowhere else to go. These laws span rural, suburban, and urban areas across states from California to West Virginia. Criminalization of homelessness is increasing despite [ample evidence](#) that punitive approaches often cost more and prove less effective than providing housing and services to those experiencing homelessness.

As the nonprofit [Community Solutions](#) emphasizes, a major problem with current homelessness response strategies in many communities is that accountability is dispersed across numerous agencies and organizations—no single actor is fully accountable for solving homelessness. While Continuums of Care (CoC) have the formal responsibility of coordination and strategic planning for communities, organizations within a CoC often maintain siloes focused on their specific programs. This siloed ecosystem often lacks a clear objective—such as achieving functional zero homelessness. Additionally, the yearly Point-In-Time (PIT) count of people experiencing homelessness is not specific enough to enable targeted action given that the people experiencing homelessness differs each night. These challenges with organization, accountability, and data have led to a broken re-housing system that fails to outpace the inflow of people into homelessness.

Though federal government funding and HUD systems undergird the homelessness response, localities must take responsibility for implementing solutions within that federal system and their



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*

local context; this takes on heightened importance as of the writing of this tool there are threats to those federal funding sources. In recent years, mayors in Denver and Cleveland, among others, have campaigned on this issue, bringing necessary attention and prioritization to developing solutions, and have found success with the Housing Command Center model.

## Proposed Solution: Housing Command Centers

The solution to homelessness seems simple: match people in need of support and shelter with services and available housing units. However, simple does not mean easy, and HCC implementation requires committed leadership and both initial funding for structural and systemic changes as well as sustained funding to maintain the new system. In terms of leadership, communities must identify the center of gravity for decision-making to drive a different type of response and organize resources differently to address homelessness. This center of gravity could be the mayor, the city manager, the business community, an outspoken advocate, a faith leader, or really anyone who has strong influence and reach in their community and the power to enact change in the response system. Prior to implementation, successful communities must also have homeless assistance providers with enough capacity to provide case management and re-housing, given that an HCC relies on outreach workers. It is also critical that there be a centralized team responsible for acquiring units under the HCC, rather than having this function distributed across multiple entities, as pairing housing options with outreach is critical to expediting the re-housing process.

Communities have used various funding methods for HCC responses to homelessness. Houston's model relied on federal funding for specific challenges or disasters and leverages Housing Choice Vouchers. Recent examples have been able to rely less on federal funding. Cleveland primarily uses general operating budget funds combined with emergency vouchers allocated through the American Rescue Plan Act that needed to be used, while Denver funds its program through a retail sales tax increase specifically designated for funding homelessness services and housing. In both Cleveland and Denver, the average annual cost to house an individual and provide necessary supportive services ranges from \$24,000 to \$30,000.

Housing Command Centers represent a fundamental shift in how communities respond to homelessness by treating it as an urgent crisis and implementing a unified approach to accelerating housing placement. By leveraging its authority to establish shared goals and coordinate efforts among service providers and landlords, a city can lead a more streamlined, efficient re-housing process and connect unhoused people with individualized services they need. Modeling the urgency displayed in responding to natural disasters, HCC teams rapidly assess needs, match individuals to available housing and services, and remove barriers to placement, drastically reducing the time required to house individuals. By prioritizing collaboration, flexibility, and speed,



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*

HCCs ensure that people experiencing homelessness receive timely support. While specific funding sources and intervention points may vary by locality, the core principle remains the same: homelessness is an emergency and warrants the same level of urgency as any other disaster.

The Housing Command Center model began taking shape in response to the historic 2016 Louisiana flood and subsequent, compounding emergencies resulting from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria in 2017. The magnitude of these disasters created a need to rethink the local emergency housing response, with FEMA supporting the development and implementation of a new approach. When flooding struck Baton Rouge in 2016, there happened to be one person serving as the Executive Director of the Housing Authority, embedded within the Housing Finance Agency, and overseeing the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program. This individual was therefore able to take more of a systems level approach to combine and streamline funding to better and more quickly meet housing needs. The overlap in roles enabled the state to respond to the floods using HOME Tenant Based Rental Assistance, ESG, and Housing Choice Vouchers so that people in disaster shelters could exit to permanent housing.

This streamlined approach to natural disaster response informed Houston's recovery from Hurricane Harvey the following year, leveraging [Category B](#) of FEMA's Public Assistance Program to implement a Command Center for housing. The Command Center adapted the flatter hierarchy of emergency response to homelessness policy and interventions, enabling quick decision-making to house and serve people in need. Houston's first Special Assistant to the Mayor for Homeless Initiatives, appointed in 2013, brought targeted focus to this issue and successfully led design and implementation of the HCC response. [As of 2022](#), Houston was able to reduce the wait time for housing to 32 days, a remarkable reduction from the average of 720 days in 2012.

Today, Houston is widely regarded as a national leader in implementing a coordinated response to homelessness. The city's first targeted response began prior to the hurricanes, with participation in the [Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness](#) in 2012. This challenge created the impetus and federal resources for then-Mayor Annise Parker to convene all relevant parties and figure out how to match [HUD-VASH vouchers](#) with veterans experiencing homelessness, resulting in "functional-zero" for veteran homelessness. The city then moved to partner with Harris County to combine the mental health services of the county and the housing funding services of the city to tackle broader homelessness using the same streamlined model. Since 2012, according to the [Coalition for the Homeless of Houston / Harris County](#), over 33,000 people have been housed with a 90% success rate for local housing programs. This collaboration went a step further in the aftermath of the hurricanes in 2017, when Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner declared that no one would leave the disaster shelters homeless. This disaster brought additional federal resources, allowing Houston to treat broader homelessness with the urgency of an emergency response.

The COVID-19 pandemic further crystallized and expanded this "unified command group" response, especially given that providing non-congregate shelter options at this time became



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

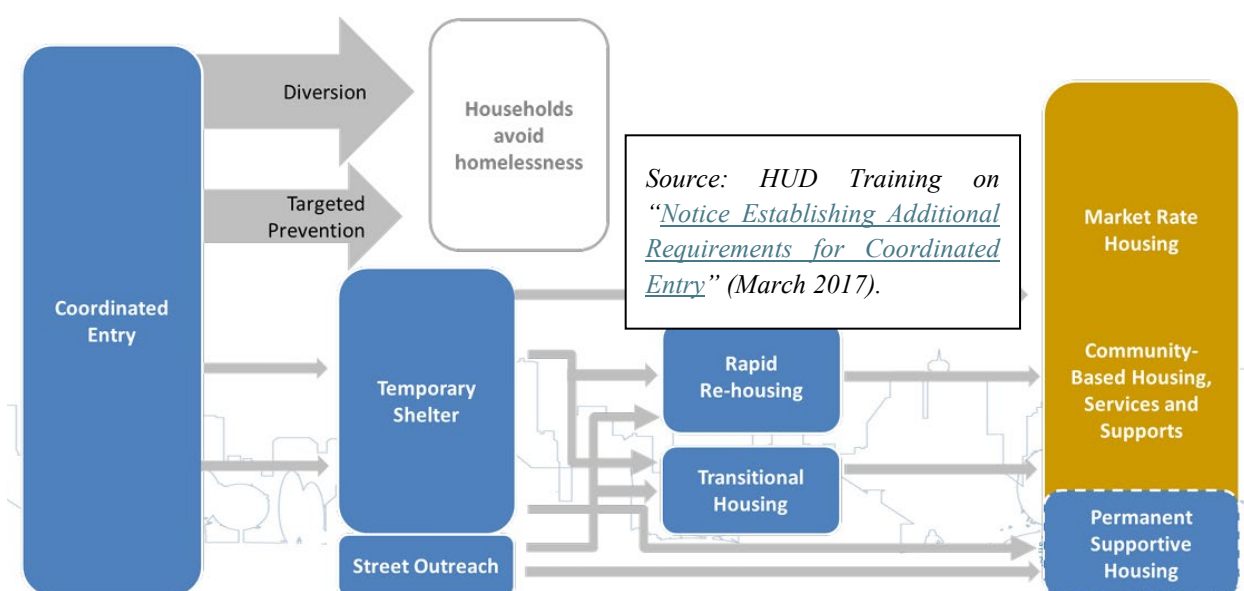
Nowak Metro Finance Lab

Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation



essential. Los Angeles launched [Project Roomkey](#) to provide hotel and motel rooms to individuals experiencing homelessness who were particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, and the State of California launched the [Homekey](#) program to provide funds to acquire and/or develop hotels and motels for conversion into permanent supportive housing. Through collaboration between the federal, state, and county governments as well as the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), 4,000 units in 37 hotels and motels were secured for temporary housing. The expedient response catalyzed by the COVID-19 emergency made leaders start to work through how this type of re-housing process could be extrapolated and sustained. On her first day in office in 2022, Mayor Karen Bass declared a State of Emergency on homelessness and launched [Inside Safe](#), which has brought over 4,000 people inside and over 900 of them into permanent housing through a Command Center approach.

The following case studies examine two cities, Denver and Cleveland, that have achieved great success with the Housing Command Center approach, using it to accelerate the housing process at different intervention points. In Cleveland, a right-to-shelter city, the [A Home for Every Neighbor](#) initiative focuses on the chronically homeless unsheltered population and works to provide options that allow them to remain stably housed. In Denver, the HCC component of the [All In Mile High](#) initiative identified a need for more non-congregate shelter beds to effectively re-house people living in large encampments. Figure 2 below depicts the typical process from Coordinated Entry to a permanent housing solution. Denver condenses the steps between temporary shelter and a permanent housing option through their HCC. Cleveland similarly condenses this process but starts with street outreach. In both cities, the HCCs help speed up the outlined pathway to housing, that may have alternatively been determined through Coordinated Entry, by guiding individuals through the process while prioritizing getting housing or shelter as quickly as possible.



HCCs expedite the re-housing process, visibly and tangibly reducing the number of people sleeping outside and supporting these individuals in getting stabilized.

## Case studies

### Denver, CO

Denver has made remarkable progress toward ending street homelessness in recent years. Current Mayor Mike Johnston, who assumed office in July 2023, campaigned on this issue and on his second day in office declared a [State of Emergency](#) on Homelessness, setting a goal to house 1,000 people by the end of 2023, and end street homelessness by the end of his first term in 2027. A key element of this plan includes building 10-20 micro-communities on nonprofit or publicly owned land to create more units of [dignified alternate sheltering](#), which the [Colorado Village Collaborative](#) was founded to produce. This type of shelter provides an alternative to traditional congregate shelter beds and typically includes individual units to enhance safety and accessibility for those that feel or are unwelcome in traditional shelters. The city [successfully met their House1000 goal](#), housing 1,034 individuals by the end of 2023 by providing them with supportive services and non-congregate shelter options in [hotels, motels, or micro-communities](#). By providing shelter options that offered safety, privacy, and dignity, the city was able to close 10 encampments in this process. House1000 was the [first time in Denver's history](#) that the city was able to permanently resolve encampments by providing an array of bespoke support services including mental health care, substance misuse treatment, and workforce training in addition to housing.

In early 2024, House1000 rolled into the [All In Mile High](#) initiative and Mayor Johnston set a new goal of bringing another 1,000 people indoors during that year. By October, they had [met this goal](#), housing a total of 2,064 people since Mayor Johnston took office. In line with the proven “[Housing First](#)” strategy, the first priority was bringing people inside to shelter. In the first six months of Mayor Johnston’s tenure, independent service providers worked to find permanent housing for sheltered individuals. The city, however, quickly realized that the disparate parts of the homelessness response system needed to be better coordinated to more rapidly place people in permanent housing options that met their specific needs. Under the ongoing State of Emergency on Homelessness, the city deployed an HCC, led by the Mayor’s Senior Advisor for Homelessness Resolution, to coordinate across service providers, government departments, and private landlords, matching permanent housing resources with those in need with a sense of urgency. Critically, the leader of the HCC has been empowered by the Mayor and positioned within city government to enable expedient coordination across city departments to maneuver around any re-housing roadblocks within the purview of the city.

The Denver HCC includes housing navigators, a stabilization team, a data analyst, complex case staff, and site-based staff. The HCC coordinates moving people from temporary shelters into permanent supportive housing or other permanent housing options within 30-60 days. Site-based



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*

staff conduct outreach at shelter sites to assess each resident’s needs to remain permanently housed. The housing navigators simultaneously work to find empty units in the open market and work with private landlords to enable re-housing at fair market value, sometimes offering incentives or guarantees for damages; this team is tasked with finding 100 units every month, and sheltered residents can apply for any of the units using Housing Choice Vouchers to pay full rent for up to 12 months. Through this model, Denver has served over 2,000 people at an annual cost of \$25-30,000 per person, inclusive of staff, rent, and services.

Funding for this initiative comes from sales tax and the city’s general operating fund. In 2020, Denver voters [approved](#) a 0.25% retail sales tax to fund the Homelessness Resolution Program and other services for people experiencing homelessness—proof that [ballot funding measures](#) can be used to address a range of housing issues. This new tax generates about \$40 million a year. The city was also able to use American Rescue Plan Act dollars to purchase some hotels to convert into non-congregate shelters and permanent housing options.

With the Mayor’s focused attention on homelessness, Denver has made [immense progress](#) in drastically reducing unsheltered homelessness through both the “Housing First” approach and the Housing Central Command system working to match residents with permanent housing. By empowering the Mayor’s Senior Advisor for Homelessness Resolution to lead and coordinate closely with service providers as well as with private landlords, the city has been able to enact the necessary systems-level approach to impact this crisis with urgency. Denver’s [2024 Point-In-Time Count](#) showed an 83% reduction in unsheltered family homelessness and an 11% decline in the total unsheltered homeless population. Additionally, by the end of 2024, Denver had only 10 veterans experiencing unsheltered homelessness, effectively achieving “functional zero” while continuing to work with these individuals.

#### [Cleveland, OH](#)

Cleveland has also made significant progress in ending unsheltered homelessness using a Housing Command Center approach. After observing a concerning increase in people sleeping outside during the winter of 2023-2024, Mayor Justin Bibb recognized that addressing the issue required a greater sense of urgency and new approach. This led to the [A Home for Every Neighbor](#) initiative, launched in early 2024 with the city driving the process of more rapidly bringing people experiencing unsheltered homelessness inside. Cleveland and Cuyahoga County have [long-established policies](#) guaranteeing a right-to-shelter, with assured access to shelter for those who are homeless. Nonetheless, this guaranteed access to shelter does not ensure that shelters adequately meet the needs of unhoused individuals. The city based its approach on the HCC models deployed in Houston and Denver, acknowledging that tackling homelessness requires a system-level approach and coordination across sectors and organizations.

The city, in partnership with the County and its Office of Homeless Services, committed to bringing people inside into permanent housing as quickly as possible through its Housing



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*



Command Center, led by a Senior Advisor to the Mayor and supported by a Housing and Outreach Project Manager. As in Denver, having someone with direct access to the Mayor leading the initiative enabled the team to cut through some of the bureaucracy and anticipate political disagreements related to site prioritization to enable an accelerated re-housing process. The city identified 150 people experiencing chronic unsheltered homelessness and set a goal to house them within the first 18 months. Since July 2024, they have successfully housed 155 people, a majority of whom self-report as chronically homeless, meeting their initial goal in just eight months. Cleveland created five teams reporting to the Housing Command Center: outreach, case management, unit acquisition, subsidy, and clean-up.

The **outreach** team begins the process by engaging directly with people experiencing street homelessness, prioritizing the largest encampments and those who are most vulnerable, typically measured by risk of violence or number of 911 calls at that location, age or ability, or risk of being displaced by an external entity. The city contracted with existing, trained outreach teams who observed regular residents of a specific site over 3-5 days before approaching those people to learn whether they were interested in housing. Cleveland's approach differs from other cities in that outreach workers directly engage with individuals to assess their needs and secure appropriate housing before asking them to relocate, rather than using a punitive approach and threatening site clearing. The **clean-up** team clears the site only after residents of that encampment have been housed, and the City prevents camping on that site moving forward to ensure that the intervention remains effective. This approach helps build trust between outreach workers and people experiencing homelessness while addressing community concerns about encampments.

These residents are then matched with a **case manager**. In Cleveland, there is one case manager for every 20 participants, a remarkable level of support for a homelessness response initiative. Simultaneously, the **unit team** secures units in the private market by working with landlords willing to make units available for re-housing. City employees advocating for people experiencing homelessness has proven more successful than individuals negotiating on their own, as the city's involvement instills greater trust with landlords and enables greater flexibility. Previously, individuals would complete an assessment to be put on a waitlist for funding for housing. They would then have to find an apartment themselves, which is extraordinarily difficult, as any criminal history can be automatically prohibitive. To signal their commitment to re-housing, the city also provides landlords with incentives such as sign-on bonuses, double security deposits, a one-time payment of \$500-1,000, and the option for mutual lease termination. The team offers these incentives in recognition that the applicants often have greater needs or risks than typical tenants, and to work in good faith with the landlord to waive application fees and certain documentation requirements to expedite the placement process. The team has primarily identified available units in two-family homes and townhomes that are often close to transportation and other resources, though not necessarily close to the former camp sites. The HCC has found that if the unit meets the individual's needs, they are open to different neighborhoods. The unit team has certified



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*

building inspectors on-staff, expediting the inspection process. Approved units are added to an inventory for the case manager and participant to select from, with case managers helping with the application process.

Once the participant's application is accepted and the lease signed, the team provides a welcome kit and furniture for the unit ahead of the move-in date. The case manager continues to provide support services after the move-in date, and the City contracts with a local Community Development Corporation (CDC) to manage rental subsidy payments for up to 12 months. The typical wait time for a shelter resident to move to permanent supportive housing is 5-7 months. In contrast, the entire HCC process from outreach workers visiting the site to camp residents being housed takes approximately 2-3 weeks and is referred to as the "[Surge](#)." The average length of time between case worker intake and move-in is only 11.5 days.

To maintain the emergency response as a top priority, the HCC meets daily to address complex cases and ensure that people with complicated needs are supported in obtaining stable housing. This type of [case conferencing](#) is only made possible through reliable by-name, real-time data that enables record-keeping of each person experiencing homelessness, their specific needs, and where they are in the process. Data are inputted by organizations across the community in this more detailed format and typically housed in that community's existing Homeless Management Information System ([HMIS](#)). Daily case conferencing ensures accountability for entering and updating information in this system, and it enables communities to understand trends and progress over time. [Community Solutions](#) helps cities set up the systems to collect and utilize this information, as they do in Cleveland, rather than needing to rely on yearly Point-In-Time (PIT) counts to track progress.

Cleveland also allocated \$600,000 to a flex fund to address miscellaneous needs that prevent people from remaining stably housed. Needs addressed through this fund included things like paying a fee for a certification to pursue employment or clearing a criminal record to pass a background check. Awards from this fund were capped at \$1500 per person, though most needs were under \$500. Cleveland's flex fund made up a small portion of the \$4.7 million in total funding for this initiative, with \$2.7 million being spent on rental assistance and an average of \$24,000 being spent per person per year on housing and support services. Having a flex fund to make small investments can be crucial to unlocking a person's ability to remain stably housed, and this has emerged as a best practice for communities implementing HCCs. In places where city funding is less flexible, philanthropic partners often step up to create this type of fund.

Now that Cleveland has reached its near-term goal of "functional zero" unsheltered homelessness, the potential next step involves working with the county CoC to apply the HCC model to reduce the time taken for individuals to move from shelters to permanent supportive housing, similar to how the HCC is used in Denver. The city is also exploring using the HCC model to rapidly relocate people living in distressed housing that no longer meets code or that is hazardous due to lead paint.



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

Nowak Metro Finance Lab

Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation

## Diffusion and Scaling of Housing Command Centers

Housing Command Centers can be successful in any community that has solid funding, ideally including a flex fund, a centralized unit acquisition team, a robust base of homeless assistance providers with strong case management capacity, and an identified decision-maker with influence over existing systems and an appetite for thinking differently. With these pieces in place, it is also crucial to maintain a reliable database of people and their needs to be able to understand progress toward re-housing in real time. Organizations such as [Community Solutions](#) have created a blueprint for using data to drive action toward ending homelessness through Housing Command Centers. Their [Built for Zero](#) initiative includes nearly 150 participant cities committed to the goal of reaching functional zero. A key component of Community Solutions' methodology is "assembling an accountable, community-wide team," or a Command Center, to ensure that each agency or organization feels the necessary level of accountability and is able to leverage quality data for impact. With several jurisdictions implementing this approach, it has become evident that a successful Housing Command Centers include three core components:

### *Focus and prioritization from senior leadership*

As national homelessness rates continue to rise, systemic improvements are needed to remove bottlenecks and accelerate the re-housing process. This type of system redesign requires significant focus from leadership combined with resources, as was the case in Denver and Cleveland. Mayors Johnston and Bibb announced comprehensive initiatives focused on homelessness, holding themselves accountable to numeric goals. Cities taking a more active role signals their acceptance of responsibility for the issue and provides greater credibility to the response. Disaster response efforts prioritize rapid, coordinated action to secure housing for those affected, and the homelessness crisis demands a similarly structured, housing-first approach. If communities can swiftly re-house individuals after disasters, they should apply the same urgency and methodology to homelessness, without waiting on solutions for the larger affordable housing crisis.

### *Collaboration to wield collective power*

Homelessness is a multi-faceted issue and requires collaboration across numerous entities including, but not limited to, government agencies, service providers, and private landlords. As is typical in emergency management and disaster response, however, some hierarchy is needed to expedite decision-making, meaning that there needs to be a person in charge of building trust and relationships and ensuring coordination across service providers, landlords, and the public sector. [Clutch Consulting](#), a group born out of Houston's success, helps communities designate roles for different teams and establishes workflows for successfully and expediently re-housing individuals. [By-name data](#) is also crucial for effective coordination and response so that disparate entities can keep track of each individual and their specific needs.



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**  
*Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation*

### *Flexibility to iterate and adjust*

Each community faces unique challenges, and an effective Housing Command Center must adapt and refine its approach through small-scale trial and error. Cleveland, for example, spent a month piloting its program before launching its HCC and started with people experiencing chronic unsheltered homelessness, while Denver set an initial six-month re-housing goal, which they then built upon with a second year-long target. Houston's response started with veterans' homelessness and broadened from there. Best practices suggest beginning with larger encampments to concentrate resources and address the broadest range of needs, ensuring the system has been tested to scale effectively. It is also best practice to have a local team negotiate with landlords to assess a fair price for the units and to have a flex fund when possible to address smaller miscellaneous needs that enable successful permanent re-housing.

### *The Path Forward*

With these three core components, and an influx of one-time funding for system redesign followed by sustained funding, a Housing Command Center can serve as a powerful tool to effectively reduce homelessness. Though a robust HCC approach requires significant investment, it is important to consider that cities are already paying the cost of homelessness, not only by having people living outside, but through hospitalization, medical and emergency room treatment, incarceration, emergency shelter, and mental health service costs. As a [recent study](#) in Dallas and Collin counties found, these costs amount to roughly \$43,000/year per person compared to the estimated \$26,000/year per person it takes to permanently house someone through the [Housing Forward](#) HCC. Keeping the cost of inaction in mind along with successful re-housing numbers can help make the case for sustained funding for Housing Command Centers. Treating homelessness as an emergency brings necessary focus and urgency to accelerate the outflow of people from homelessness into stable housing, eventually outpacing the inflow of people into homelessness.

*Emily Desmond is a Special Projects Manager at the Nowak Metro Finance Lab where she provides analysis, writing, and project management support across work streams.*



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

Nowak Metro Finance Lab

Lindly Institute for Urban Innovation