



million
ONE JAIL AT A TIME.
story

E9S3 Where Housing, Not Jails is the Answer to Homelessness

In California, so-called “quality of life” laws criminalize things like panhandling, living in cars, and blocking sidewalks. Reporter Sarah McClure chronicles how arresting homeless individuals entangles them in a cycle of poverty and incarceration—and how three groups are breaking the cycle.

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The Story

Helping more than half a million homeless people in the United States through innovative public health efforts, rather than policing



Andrea Smith in her bedroom inside Ms. Hazel's House. Wednesday August 26, 2020, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Courtney Coles

“I am so forever been grateful and it feels so good today that I don't have to drink. I don't have to smoke dope. I don't have to do none of that. All I can do today is live, you know, live and enjoy. I ain't got to worry about where I'm going to eat. I ain't got to worry about where I'm asleep. I ain't gotta worry about who's gonna hurt me. And I'm happy and it don't get no better than this y'all.”

-Andrea Smith

There are more than half a million homeless people in the United States. They are often targeted by “quality of life” laws that allow police to issue fines and arrest or jail people for sleeping outside, sitting for too long on a bench, or panhandling.

In Los Angeles County, California, Andrea Smith, like many others in her situation, has lived in fear of being harassed by the police for decades. She's suffered from addiction, and has a history of abuse and trauma.

According to advocates, addiction and mental health issues are widespread in the homeless population, and helping people overcome homelessness in a meaningful and sustainable way requires a public health response, rather than a criminal justice one.

Andrea is among those who have benefitted from an innovative program offered by the Los Angeles County prosecutor's office called LA DOOR (Los Angeles Deflection, Outreach and Opportunities for Recovery), which seeks to help clients through consistent case management, expungement of past convictions, housing and therapeutic opportunities. In Andrea's case, LA DOOR helped her to get a California ID, housing, medical insurance, and access to a drug rehabilitation program. She is working to get her criminal record expunged, which will open up more housing and work opportunities.

The Mission

Eradicate homelessness, and break the cycles of poverty and incarceration. by taking a public health approach rather than punitive one.

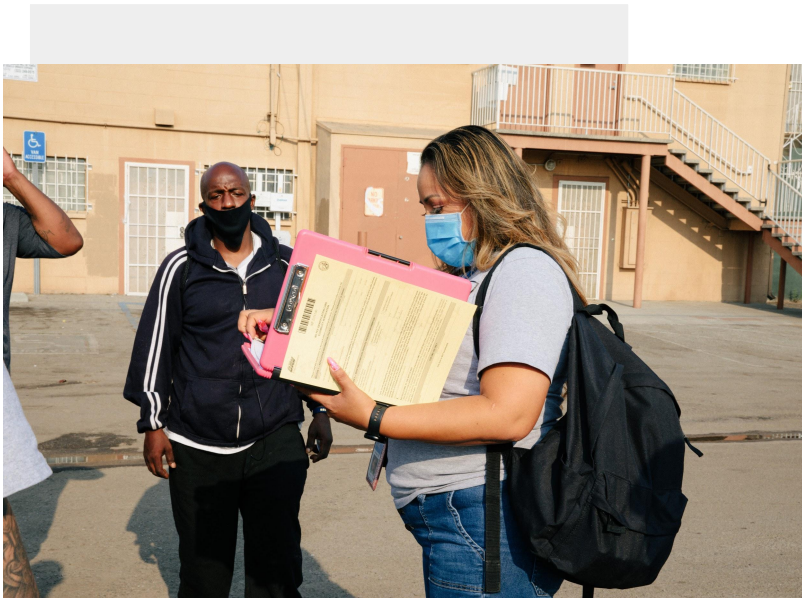
“LA DOOR was designed to test the experiment from the perspective of a prosecutor’s office of, ‘what happens if you really prioritize a public health approach to these issues?’ In other words, if you try to have police step back. If you try to say, we’re going to respond to this with a public health approach. We’re not going to respond to this in a criminal justice system. Is that a better solution?”

-Jamie Larson, prosecutor, LA City Attorney’s Office

Instead of a punitive policing approach, innovative programs like LA DOOR, Project Homekey and the Office of Diversion and Reentry (ODR), are working to address the underlying causes of homelessness: addiction, mental health issues, criminal history, and the lack of accessible housing. For many, the harsh drug policies of the 90’s have resulted in felony records that can make it difficult to apply for jobs and housing, and a long antagonistic history with institutions has made them wary of trusting authorities to help rather than curtail freedoms.

These programs are changing the overall approach to ending homelessness, by prioritizing the health and wellbeing of the people served, rather than punishing them. For example, Project Homekey, which was originally created in the midst of the COVID crisis as Project Roomkey to protect the homeless population from illness, is turning vacant hotels, motels and apartment buildings into permanent housing across the state. Tens of thousands of Californians have been served by the programs already.

The broader mission is to provide consistent support over months and even years, so that potential clients establish trust, overcome addiction and begin to feel safe and comfortable within a housed environment. Through legal services, they can also work to expunge tickets and criminal records that may have kept them from gaining independence in the past.



Suzy Urbina handing out identification applications for the DMV. Wednesday, August 19, 2020, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Courtney Coles

The Strategy

Create more housing, enlist the help of peers with lived experience, provide consistent support for a high-touch, personalized approach



J.R. stands for Just Right, photographed on Wednesday, August 19, 2020, in Los Angeles, California. Photo: Courtney Coles

“We need to be shifting our funding priorities away from law enforcement-led responses — which are shown to be one the most expensive and least effective interventions — toward non-punitive solutions, like supportive housing and outreach workers.”

-Professor Sara Rankin

The strategy being used in California emphasizes eliminating the barriers that homeless people often face, while providing them with meaningful support to make the transition to housing.

Access to housing

Programs like Project Roomkey and Project Homekey acknowledge that access to housing is critical to combating homelessness. While housing alone won't solve the crisis, it's a necessary component to transition individuals and families to safety and independence, which should be given priority over punishment.

Public health approach

Looking first at the underlying health issues, such as mental health issues and drug addiction, is essential to helping this population, advocates say. What's more, tickets and criminal records from a previous policing approach often get in the way of accessing services, and may need to be expunged before someone becomes eligible for housing and employment opportunities.

Case managers with lived experience

At LA DOOR, Jamie Larson says the people on her team make all the difference. Their lived experience with homelessness, overcoming addiction, and/or navigating the criminal justice system informs their work and their ability to support their clients.

Consistency

Case managers for LA DOOR come back every week on the same day, which helps deliver the message that they are there to stay, when so many other groups have come and gone. It helps overcome the suspicion of those they are trying to assist and connect to services. Advocates say that people who have been unhoused for a long time may feel safer outdoors than inside, especially if they associate four walls with abusive childhoods, incarceration or institutionalization. It may take months or years to establish trust and make headway, so consistent support is key.

Resources

More information about LA DOOR can be found here:

<https://www.lacityattorney.org/homelessness>

Project 180, a wraparound program to support recently incarcerated individuals and prevent recidivism, uses its staffing resources to support LA DOOR. Information about their other programs can be found here:

<https://www.project180la.com/>

For more information about Project Roomkey, California's effort to house vulnerable populations during the COVID pandemic:

<https://covid19.lacounty.gov/project-roomkey/>

Additional information about Project Homekey, the permanent effort to provide housing to California's homeless in former motels, hotels and vacant apartment buildings, which grew out of Project Roomkey:

<https://hcd.ca.gov/grants-funding/active-funding/homekey.shtml>

For more information on what you can do to help end homelessness, visit the National Alliance to End Homelessness:

<https://endhomelessness.org/help-end-homelessness/>

Adrienne and Suzy doing a soft hand-off. Wednesday, August 19, 2020, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Courtney Coles



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