



UNITY of Greater New Orleans outreach worker engaging a man staying in an encampment  
PHOTO: UNITY OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS

**NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA**

# Reducing homelessness as housing supply tightens

The devastation inflicted by Hurricane Katrina exacerbated homelessness. The storm damaged or destroyed 70 percent of the city’s housing stock, and in 2007 the homeless population on a given night had ballooned to 11,619. New Orleans’ responded with over a decade of aggressive outreach and housing provision. As a result, the number of people experiencing homelessness in 2009 dropped to 1,179.

**T**he number of chronically homeless individuals has continued to decline, dropping 24 percent from 2018–2019 and 64 percent since 2017. This decline has come against a more general backdrop of recovery for the city. The

city’s population has increased 13.7 percent from 2010 to 2018, median household income is now higher, and unemployment rates are lower than the state. However, recovery in New Orleans has not reached all segments of the population.

**“We are dealing with huge rent increases while median income has actually declined. The result is that every single day in our community people are newly falling into homelessness ... and our coalition does not have enough rent assistance to house all the people who need it.”<sup>1</sup>**

*Martha Kegel  
Director of Unity of Greater  
New Orleans*

The city has the highest poverty rate of the top 50 largest US metro areas,<sup>2</sup> and the Brookings Institution recently ranked New Orleans the fourth most disparate US city in income inequality.<sup>3</sup>

There is a concern that the dynamics of the city's recovery have created conditions that threaten to again increase homelessness. After a decade of decreases in homeless population size, the 2019 count of 1,179 was comparable to 2018, with campaigns to house the homeless in 2018 offset by others becoming newly homeless.

During this time, however, the unsheltered population size has continued to decrease, from 594 to 430, while rehousing opportunities for those living unsheltered have increased. The amount of permanent supportive housing has increased significantly since 2010, and volume of rapid rehousing has continued to increase since the formal program began in 2013. In addition to the provision of housing, two factors contributing to this continuing decrease are outreach services and the opening of a low-barrier shelter.

### **INNOVATIVE FEATURE:** **HOUSING-FOCUSED OUTREACH SERVICES**

Outreach was a central component in addressing homelessness in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Nonprofit organizations, led by UNITY of Greater New Orleans (UNITY), the homeless services Continuum of Care (CoC) lead agency, engaged in systematic outreach into thousands of vacant houses and structures that had become places of refuge for hundreds of vulnerable individuals.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, outreach workers played a key role in helping homeless people leave — without any evictions — two large encampments in 2007 and 2008. They directly provided housing for the 457 people that remained in the encampments (putting people in hotels as temporary bridge housing while locating apartments) and then closed the camps. Local government and the local mental health agency were instrumental

## **HOUSING FIRST APPROACH**

**Outreach in New Orleans was a pioneer in linking people in unsheltered situations directly with permanent housing using a Housing First approach. Priority is given to providing people with permanent housing as quickly and directly as possible.**

in this process, providing resources for hotels and case management, and state and federal agencies provided rapid rehousing rental assistance resources.

### **Housing First approach**

The key to the success of the outreach program has been the practice of initiating direct placements to housing while engaging the people living unsheltered. The assessment and triage procedures developed became the basis for the CoC's coordinated entry procedures. The diversity of the outreach staff and their strong community connections have facilitated their ability to initiate contact and maintain rapport with the unsheltered population.

### **Engaged public agencies**

Public agencies are actively engaged in outreach, as well. The New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) provides

**“I have the time to go to a scene and sit down and talk to a person for a while and find out what they need and see if they need healthcare, housing, a job, or to get back home.”**

*B.B. St. Roman, NOPD's Homeless Assistance Collaborative<sup>5</sup>*

outreach services through their Homeless Assistance Collaborative, a longstanding two-person uniformed civilian detail. The Homeless Assistance Collaborative engages homeless individuals and acts as the police liaison to homeless providers. It assisted with outreach and transportation to help people in the encampments move into housing.

### **Leading with LEAD**

Since 2017, the City of New Orleans has been affiliated with the nationwide Law Enforcement Assistance Diversion Program (LEAD<sup>®</sup>). LEAD, a pre-booking diversion program, allows law enforcement officers to redirect people to community-based services, instead of jail and prosecution.<sup>6</sup>

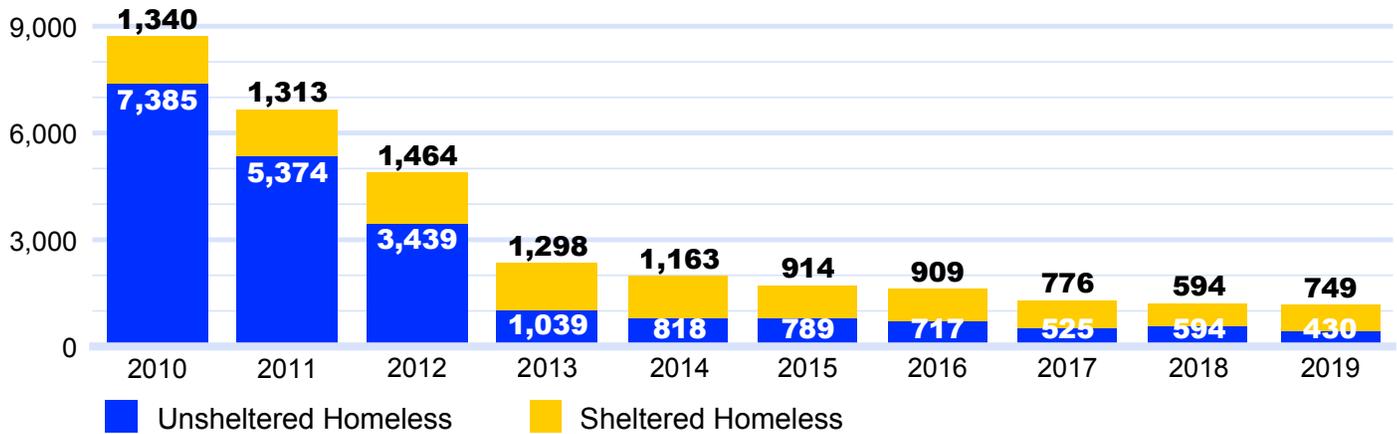
In conjunction with the City's Public Health Department, NOPD police officers in the 8<sup>th</sup> District, which includes the French Quarter and the Central Business District, identify low-level offenders to participate in the LEAD program. The LEAD participants start with street-based outreach and progress to intensive case management with the goal of securing housing and other services that divert them from further involvement with the legal system. Of the 30 people on the LEAD caseload, all experienced homelessness, and most would be categorized as chronically homeless.<sup>7</sup>

### **INNOVATIVE FEATURE:** **LOW-BARRIER SHELTER**

Starting in the years immediately following Hurricane Katrina, the majority of displaced or vulnerable persons have been moved directly from unsheltered situations to permanent housing placements. However, the demand for shelter space persists as the influx of people into unsheltered conditions continues.

In 2018 the City of New Orleans and the business community took a more active role in assisting those living unsheltered by working together to develop a 100-bed low-barrier shelter where people can stay provisionally until housing becomes available. The

# New Orleans, LA Homelessness Trends



In the past decade homelessness in New Orleans has been reduced by over 85 percent.

Source: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>



Entrance to the City of New Orleans Shelter and Engagement Center, referred to locally as the “low-barrier shelter”

shelter receives approximately one-third of its ongoing funding from the City of New Orleans discretionary sources and the remaining funding through the Downtown Development District (DDD), a business improvement district, and the New Orleans Morial Convention Center.

The City of New Orleans Shelter and Engagement Center is referred to locally as “the low-barrier shelter.” The shelter has adhered closely to the low-barrier model in providing an environment that is amenable to the needs and preferences of persons living in unsheltered situations. This includes flexible rules and 24/7 accommodations and ready engagement with housing-focused case management. Couples can get accommodations together, and there are facilities for pets. Stays are open-ended, though caseworkers engage those staying at the low-barrier shelter to assist in obtaining more permanent housing. The shelter is full nightly, and the opening appears to account for at least part of the recent reduction in the size of the unsheltered homeless population.

With near-universal support for the facility, efforts are underway to expand shelter capacity in the city.

## KEY LESSONS

New Orleans has made enormous progress in addressing homelessness during the post-Katrina era, but these reductions are starting to level off as housing availability tightens and recent economic gains fall unevenly across the city. Even as the drivers of homelessness are appearing to change, the response to unsheltered homelessness has continued to rely on its strong outreach services to link people to permanent housing while implementing a low-barrier approach to shelter.

## Collaboration is crucial

While the collaboration in New Orleans was not universal, high levels of collaboration occur between various homeless services providers, as well as between the City and more business-oriented interests. These different collaborations all contributed to New Orleans' remarkable reductions in unsheltered homelessness.

## Adapt a general model and apply it to local needs

### HOMEGROWN MODEL

New Orleans CoC created an approach that directly links outreach to housing, as well as a means for outreach services to engage people in very challenging circumstances.

### IMPORTED MODEL

New Orleans drew on models from other sources in putting together its low-barrier shelter.

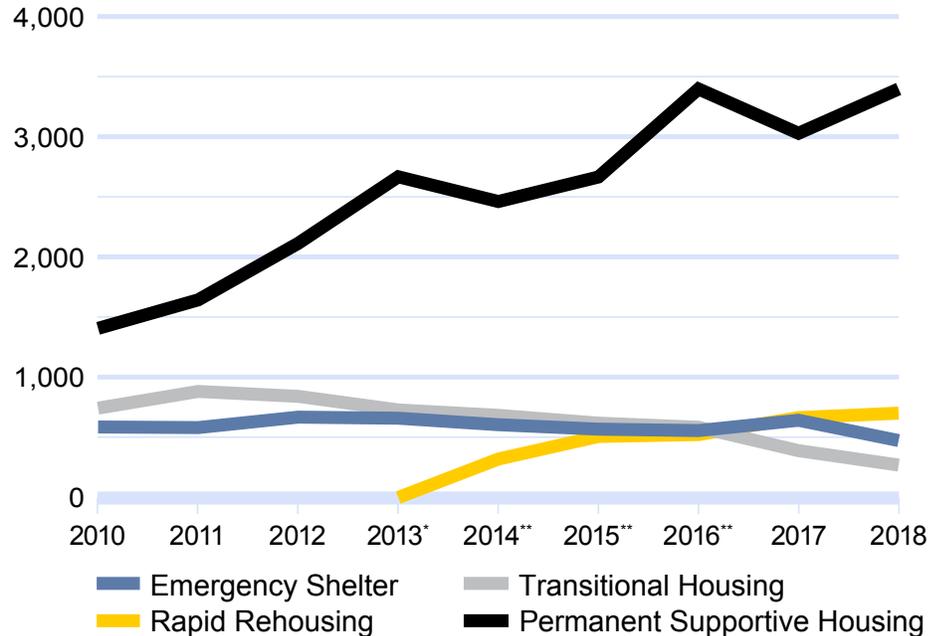
### AFFILIATE MODEL

NOPD has affiliated with and implemented the Law Enforcement Assistance Diversion Program (LEAD®), a national affiliate program.

## Focus on housing

As New Orleans has faced different challenges with addressing homelessness during different stages of the post-Katrina era, its homeless services CoC has been unwavering in maintaining a single-minded focus on permanent housing and thereby maintaining a clear, simple guiding vision.

## New Orleans, LA Total Year-Round Beds Trends



New Orleans' dramatic reductions in homelessness have come against a steadily rising supply of permanent supportive housing and (since 2013) rapid rehousing.

\* 2013 Counts RRH in Total Year-Round Beds, HMIS Participation, and Total Beds for Households with/without Children.

\*\* 2014–2016 has two types of RRH values: one that includes demonstration programs and one that excludes demonstration programs. The value including demonstration programs was used for Total Year-Round Beds (RRH).

Source: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>

## Focus on challenging populations

New Orleans has seen its best results in efforts to address its most challenging populations. Key achievements here were creating the first model for functionally ending Veteran homelessness, and realizing dramatic drops in chronic and unsheltered homelessness as well as in general levels of homelessness.

## SOLUTIONS BASED ON EVIDENCE

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropic organization with the mission to invest in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunities and minimize injustice. AV supported a study to identify practices and policies that promote alternatives to using punitive and enforcement-based measures as the primary responses to unsheltered homelessness. Project investigators conducted a three-day visit in spring–summer 2019 to each of nine sites for an in-person review of community-specific initiatives. The sites represent the major regions of the U.S. and include cities of different sizes as well as rural, suburban, and tribal areas and provide an array of different socioeconomic contexts and present different local housing market configurations.

- 1 Richard A. Webster (April 26, 2019). "New Orleans homeless population rising after 11 years of decreases, advocates fear." New Orleans Times-Picayune. Available at: [https://www.nola.com/entertainment\\_life/health\\_fitness/article\\_d055c9be-b31b-5744-827a-cd9d16bb16fd.html](https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/health_fitness/article_d055c9be-b31b-5744-827a-cd9d16bb16fd.html)
- 2 For more information on poverty rates see Louisiana Budget Project at: <https://www.labudget.org/2018/09/new-orleans-poverty-rate-tops-among-u-s-metros/>
- 3 For more on income inequality see: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/city-and-metropolitan-income-inequality-data-reveal-ups-and-downs-through-2016/>
- 4 For more on this outreach in post-Katrina vacant housing, see UNITY's publication (August 2010) "Search and Rescue Five Years Later: Saving People Still Trapped in Katrina's Ruins." Available at: [https://unitygno.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/UNITY\\_AB-Report\\_August2010.pdf](https://unitygno.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/UNITY_AB-Report_August2010.pdf)
- 5 Ambria R. Washington (March 10, 2017). "Meet the One Woman Behind NOPD's Homeless Assistance Unit." NOPD News. Available at: <https://noppdnews.com/post/march-2017/watch-meet-the-one-woman-behind-nopd-s-homeless-a/>
- 6 Definition of LEAD® from the United States Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections webpage: <https://nicic.gov/lead-law-enforcement-assisted-diversion> (September 28, 2019), "LEAD: Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion," Accession Number: 029926
- 7 Additional information on LEAD is available from the New Orleans Health Department webpage: <https://nola.gov/health-department/behavioral-health/lead/>, and from Matt Sledge (December 16, 2018), "New Orleans cops try help instead of handcuffs for downtown's 'frequent flyers'," The Advocate, available at: [https://www.nola.com/news/crime\\_police/article\\_c951ad45-d147-5064-805b-7137ddd9258b.html](https://www.nola.com/news/crime_police/article_c951ad45-d147-5064-805b-7137ddd9258b.html)