



Red Lake Tribal Secretary Sam Strong welcomes opening of navigation center. PHOTO: JESSICA LEE, MINNPOST DEC. 2018

MINNESOTA

Embrace people where they are with culturally appropriate, local solutions

Minnesota is poised to become the first large state recognized by the federal government as achieving a functional end to homelessness among Veterans. The State of Minnesota has been a pioneer in developing initial models for rapid rehousing, state interagency initiatives to address homelessness, engagement of the philanthropic sector, and alignment with a Housing First approach.

The current State leadership is notably engaged in progressive policy and investments and is firmly opposed to the criminalization of homelessness. The Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness, comprised of 12 State agencies, the Metropolitan Council, and the Governor’s and Lt. Governor’s Offices, leads the state’s efforts to achieve Housing Stability for all Minnesotans.

“It’s been too long that the Native people have been forgotten. For decades, my relatives have been on the streets ignored, under bridges and really in harsh conditions, living a really hard life. And many people recognize this is the result of decades, centuries of trauma, historical trauma, and trauma perpetrated by the federal government.”

*Sam Strong, Tribal Secretary
Red Lake Nation*

Minnesota is ranked third in the country for the lowest overall poverty rate.¹ However, it faces challenges in both the availability and affordability of housing. The gap between rents and incomes has been increasing statewide. From 2010 to 2017, the median rents rose 13 percent while the median renter’s income fell five percent.

The seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan region is being confronted with rapidly rising unsheltered homelessness. The Minnesota Housing Finance Agency notes that “even prior to the highly visible encampments in Minneapolis and Saint Paul that grew very large in 2018, the Point-in-Time (PIT) count showed that unsheltered homelessness in the Twin Cities Metro Area nearly doubled from 2015 to 2018 (from 387 to 745 people).”²

This increase occurred when homelessness overall and homelessness among other populations, including families, decreased. The 1,121 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the Twin Cities Metro Area accounted for two-thirds of the statewide unsheltered population.

INNOVATIVE FEATURE: TRANSIT OUTREACH

The 2018 Hennepin County PIT count found that 28 percent of all people experiencing homelessness were unsheltered and frequently rode Metro Transit’s buses and trains.³

VALUES & GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- > A harm-reduction, Housing First response
- > A person-centered, equity-informed focus
- > Strategic investments that maximize and leverage existing systems and resources
- > A region-wide commitment of new financial resources
- > Engagement with private and philanthropic partners

According to Metro Transit, 250 to 300 homeless people rode the train nightly — effectively creating one of the largest “shelters” in the region.

Homeless Metro Transit riders are more likely to be single men, ages 25–54, with elevated levels of mental and substance use issues, and longer experiences with homelessness than other people who experienced homelessness.⁴

In 2018, Metro Transit’s police department established the Homeless Action Team (HAT), a special year-round unit that follows a Housing First approach. The unit patrols Metro Transit trains during the overnight hours, Sunday through Thursday.

HAT’s method is outreach, not enforcement. The officers ask how they can help. They individualize their approach, identifying what a homeless person needs and working to make it happen.

“We know we cannot arrest our way out of our homeless problem. In fact throwing people into the endless legal cycle creates barriers to permanent housing options. People deserve better than to sleep on a train or a bus with no bathroom facilities or options for food. The problems need to be viewed through different lenses – mental health and substance abuse.”

Lt. Mario Ruberto and Sgt. Brooke Blakey, Metro Transit Police Department

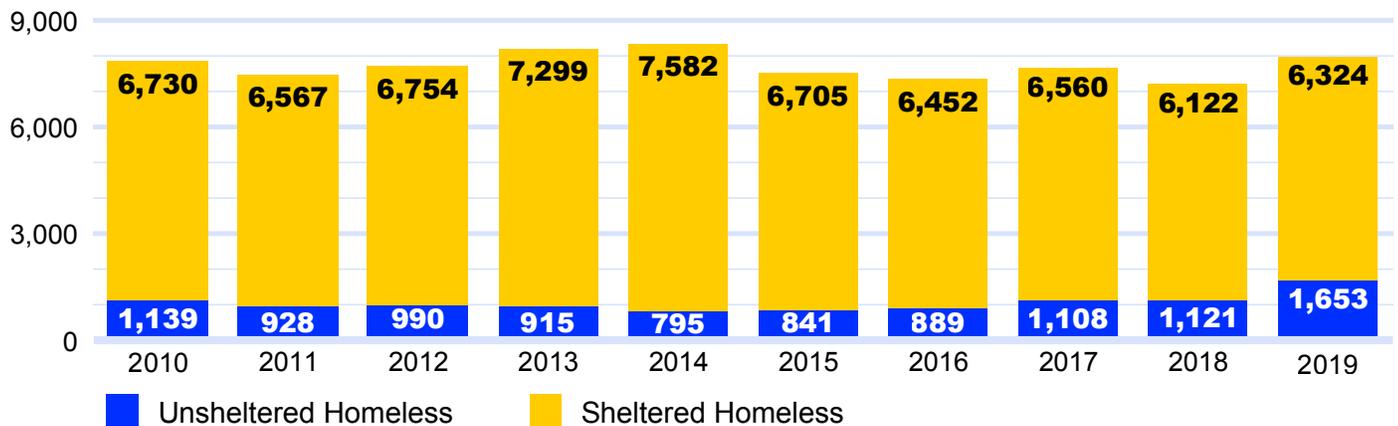


Lt. Mario Ruberto and Sgt. Brooke Blakey, Metro Transit Homeless Action Team

KEY MILESTONES IN SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

- > December 2013, Minnesota Interagency Council released Heading Home Together: Minnesota’s Statewide Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.
- > January 2016, an updated Heading Home plan was released with new strategies to guide efforts in 2016 and 2017.
- > February 2017, Heading Home Together: Minnesota’s Statewide Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness 2018–2020 was released.
- > In 2017, three of Minnesota’s Continuum of Care regions representing 40 of Minnesota’s 87 counties were confirmed by the Federal government to meet the criteria and benchmarks established for effectively ending Veteran homelessness.
- > August 2018, the Interagency Council helped coordinate responses to the growing encampments in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

Minnesota Homelessness Trends



Unsheltered homelessness is rising predominately in the Twin Cities Metro area.

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

Their new HIPAA-compliant mobile assessment vehicle is equipped to make identification cards, connect into the local homeless management information system, and provide practical services for people who are unsheltered (e.g., phone charger service and Wi-Fi).

Through a partnership with the Metro Council’s Housing and Redevelopment Authority, HAT can now directly link people to new federal Mainstream housing vouchers and community support services, allowing them to move into and maintain housing. HAT is launching a pilot program to identify the top frequent users of the transit system and emergency services and focus on providing them with services.

The Metropolitan Council, the Twin Cities’ policy and planning agency, provides essential services for the region.

INNOVATIVE FEATURE: TRIBAL COUNCIL AND NATIVE AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

“The Wall of Forgotten Natives” and “The Hiawatha Homeless Encampment” are names used to describe a large encampment that developed during the summer of 2018 on a highway right of way in the heart of the metro area’s Native American community.

Eighty percent of people staying there identified as Native American. As state, city, and county leaders began discussing how to address the needs of people at the camp, Native nonprofits emerged as critical leaders. A consortium of Native organizations called the Metro Urban Indian Directors Group (MUID) responded quickly to meet the survival needs of people living at the encampment and were in frequent dialogue with the City around determining a longer-term response. MUID was recognized by the mayor as the community advisory body for deliberations and decisions made about the encampment.

Native Americans in the Twin City Metro area are 27 times more likely to endure unsheltered homelessness than would be expected based on their population size.

In addition to MUID response, the Red Lake Nation actively engaged with resources to support the people living in tents at the encampment, including providing on-site medical care through a partnership with the Native American Community Clinic and Livio Health Group.



Hiawatha Homeless Encampment, Aug. 2018 PHOTO: JESSICA LEE, MINNPOST

In a survey of encampment residents, the vast majority said they would prefer a Native-American specific shelter.

The tribe worked with the City of Minneapolis to erect a “navigation center,” a low-barrier, 24-hour, culturally-specific shelter for the majority Native Americans at the encampment. The Center was built in just over two months, using three large heated tents on land owned by Red Lake Nation near the encampment. Designed to sleep 120 people, the navigation center welcomed 175 and was a service-rich, low-barrier shelter that practiced harm reduction, an evidence-based practice that focuses on reducing risks and negative impacts associated with substance abuse and other addictive behaviors. Services were provided on-site by a consortium of agencies.

Listening to the community being served and meeting individuals where they were made it possible to achieve quicker housing outcomes and to treat co-occurring diseases and challenges.

Two non-native, community-based nonprofits administered the navigation center. Simpson Housing, a seasoned shelter operator, served as the site operator, and Avivo provided housing placement services to help residents exit to stable housing. Both had expertise, capacity, and organizational approaches that were respected by the Red Lake Nation and city officials. The Native American Community Development Institute, with support from a local Foundation, launched WiiDooKoDaaDiiWag, also known as THEO (“They Help Each Other” in Ojibwe). THEO convened navigation center guests to help develop grassroots solutions to the issues facing the indigenous community, including affordable housing, shelter, and supportive services.

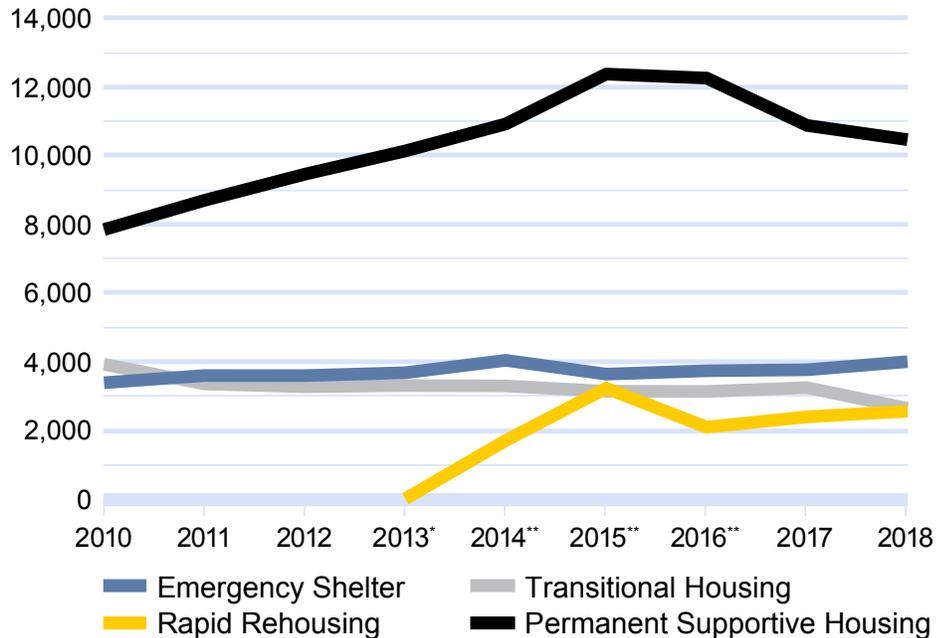
The June 2019 deadline for closing the navigation center aligned with Red Lake Nation’s plans to build a 109-unit affordable housing community on the site. Almost half of the center residents were successfully placed in housing or long-term treatment upon closure. Public agencies spent more than \$3.2 million in capital costs, and the \$1.2 million operations cost was covered by an anonymous private donor. While this effort was successful on many levels, it highlighted gaps in shelter, services, and housing, pointing to the need for systems change.

INNOVATIVE FEATURE:

LEVERAGE THE EXPERTISE OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

In response to the growing encampments in Minneapolis-Saint Paul and people using Metro Transit as a shelter, the State of Minnesota’s Interagency Council on Homelessness

Minnesota Total Year-Round Beds Trends



Permanent housing options increase as emergency shelter beds generally remain constant over time.

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

** 2014-16 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/>

Framework for Responding Effectively as a Region to Unsheltered Homelessness in the Twin Cities Metro Area



convened an Unsheltered Design Team and Public Sector Leadership Team. The professionally facilitated teams were comprised of experts with lived experience of homelessness, city, county, regional, and state elected officials and senior public agency representatives, nonprofit leaders,

philanthropic organizations, and other advocates. The Design Team developed specific recommendations for the most effective and impactful ways to address unsheltered homelessness. Recommendations were received by the Public Sector Leadership Team to implement.

The resulting plan,⁵ released in February 2019, identified the most critical, immediate steps that leaders can take, including building regionally-aligned, flexible policies and practices to provide consistency across communities since people experiencing homelessness move across boundaries regularly, and adding capacity to low-barrier shelter and for permanent housing. State leaders credit this approach, which relied heavily on the expertise of people with lived experience of homelessness, as showcasing the human impact of the fractured response to homelessness.

KEY LESSONS

Make shelters very low-barrier with full harm reduction

The navigation center provided a means for quickly transitioning people from encampments to a safer setting while making linkages to longer-term housing. This model enables individualized responses compared to programmatic, rules-based shelters. Harm reduction focuses on reducing risks and negative impacts associated with substance abuse and other addictive behaviors. Navigation center residents are encouraged, but not required, to reduce their consumption of harmful substances. Practices may include needle exchanges and other equipment distribution programs and safe injection and utilization sites.

Cut red tape for effective services and partnerships

State and local government removed bureaucratic barriers to expedite funding opportunities, execute contracts, and provide more flexible services and housing arrangements, which was especially critical for the state to work with tribal governments.

Work with law enforcement as part of the solution

Law enforcement changed their enforcement-based approach to one centered upon community-based policing and problem solving. As first responders to homelessness, they became essential partners in planning for improved regional strategies. Transit police, in particular, have developed creative ways to engage people and move them to permanent housing or temporary shelter while permanent housing is being located.

Fully engage people with lived experience of homelessness

Garner the expertise of people with lived experience for more effective strategies. Awareness of the human impact of the fractured response to homelessness led to a greater willingness by system leaders to shift responses and resources to more effective approaches.

Foster cross-tribal, inter-government, and multi-sector responses

Strong inter-governmental partnership between Tribal Nations and state and local governments was critical, as was coordination among many sectors providing the response, most importantly the native-specific nonprofit experts. Native Americans are members of a diverse range of tribes but will be better served by programs and services that are culturally specific.

Solicit early investment by philanthropy

Twin Cities philanthropy stepped up in a dramatic way, funding 99 percent of the temporary Navigation Center's operating cost with a donation of over \$1 million. Philanthropic partners also funded efforts to bring the voices of people with lived experience to the table.

Create partnerships across jurisdictions that address the needs of all

People who are homeless in unsheltered spaces have no other options, so include them as stakeholders, along with those who use the public spaces. Work to limit harm in public spaces beyond only responding to complaints. This approach requires partnerships among governments, housing, outreach, law enforcement, and public property owners.

Fail forward

Everyone, including homeless services systems, should take more risks. Learning from what did not work is a way to move forward. As one law enforcement official noted, by tackling one thing at a time to create solutions, then moving on to the next, more progress is achieved than by trying to tackle everything at once.

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 For more on poverty rates see: <https://talkpoverty.org/state-year-report/minnesota-2018-report/>

2 For more information see MN Housing Finance Agency policy report: "Responding Effectively as a Region to Unsheltered Homelessness in the Twin Cities Metro Area," February 11, 2019.

3 For information on 2018 and 2019 ridership see the Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness, Unsheltered Point-In-Time Count, July, 2019 at: <https://www.hennepin.us/your-government/projects-initiatives/heading-home-hennepin>

4 For more information see: Wilder Research, Metro Transit Riders: a special analysis of data from the 2018 Minnesota homeless study, July 2019 <https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/homelessness-minnesota-2018-study#study-reports>

5 Responding Effectively as a Region to Unsheltered Homelessness in the Twin Cities Metro Area, February 11, 2019

