Housecalls for the Homeless is an effort by volunteers and the Upstate Medical University to provide services in shelters and during street outreach. Dr. David Lehmann leads this effort.

GREATER SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

The community that calls 211 instead of 911 for homelessness response

Despite modest housing costs, a significant segment of the population is priced out of non-subsidized housing. Greater Syracuse has traditionally had very low levels of unsheltered homelessness. In the 2019 Point-in-Time (PIT) count, 13 people were counted as unsheltered. Overall homelessness has dropped from 1,024 persons in 2014 to 732 persons in 2019, as measured by the PIT count.

Since the 1970s, Greater Syracuse has struggled economically following the loss of its industrial and manufacturing base. It is ranked ninth among places in the U.S. with the highest poverty rates. Greater Syracuse spans across three counties in central New York. The region has a combined population of 661,000 and encompasses the city of Syracuse, surrounding suburbs, and outlying rural areas.

Local government and nonprofit homeless services providers come together to address unsheltered homelessness. The strategies implemented are built on coordinated, round-the-clock outreach capacity paired with low-barrier shelter access and housing placement, which are generally sufficient to meet needs.

Homeless services are centered upon the Housing First approach, with a robust, highly coordinated system of providers and an expanding supply of low-barrier, permanent housing options. Multiple stakeholders describe good relationships between homeless services providers and police, sheriff's deputies, and downtown security staff.

Engagement and outreach are the first response to situations involving homelessness. Syracuse was highlighted in the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty's report, "Housing Not Handcuffs," for not criminalizing homelessness.

The federal government has recognized Syracuse for functionally ending homelessness among Veterans. Greater Syracuse has a goal of ending all homelessness by 2021.

SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION MILESTONES

> In 2011, the Continuum of Care (CoC) launched a new strategic plan to end homelessness that was aligned with Opening Doors, the federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness. The plan was updated in 2017.

> Onondaga County received recognition for achieving a functional end to Veteran homelessness by USICH in November 2015.

> The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty recognized Syracuse in 2016 as a "Hall of Fame City" for the decriminalization of homelessness and investment in housing and services ("Housing Not Handcuffs").

INNOVATIVE FEATURE: UNIFIED SYSTEMS WITH PRIORITY RESPONSE TO THOSE LIVING UNSHELTERED

When interviewed, community leaders emphasized how the area's successes in reducing homelessness were due to collaboration, communication, and creativity to develop trusting relationships. A strongly shared value system, based on the concept that housing is a basic right and homelessness can be ended, is at the core of the network. Through a shared commitment to serving all, and a willingness to take risks and try new ideas, partnerships were forged across the government, nonprofit, business, and faith sectors.

Syracuse's frigid winters, which frequently trigger the state's code blue laws that require making shelter available to all, have helped accelerate progress. Unsheltered persons are engaged until their unique needs are met and they are offered shelter and housing.

Syracuse CoC and the system structure

As with most local homeless services systems, Greater Syracuse's system is organized around a Continuum of Care (CoC) structure that allocates the area's federal funding. The Syracuse CoC administers a real-time, centralized homeless management information system as well as a coordinated entry system that provides a single point of entry for housing placements. A robust 211 provider coordinates outreach response and shelter referrals and provides diversion assistance on a 24/7 year-round basis.

The CoC has significantly increased permanent housing placement over time, creating sufficient turnover so that shelters generally can accommodate any new inflow. County contracts are in place to ensure adequate emergency shelter operating in line with low-barrier and housing-focused practices.

Multiple nonprofit and government agencies, including a range of law enforcement agencies and the downtown business improvement district, actively participate in collaborative case conferencing and housing placement processes. City and County staff, who are charged with addressing homelessness, pro-actively engage with police, fire/EMS, and other first responders, as well as the local healthcare, criminal justice, and child welfare systems.

INNOVATIVE FEATURE: PARTNERSHIPS THAT PROMOTE ALTERNATIVES TO CRIMINALIZATION
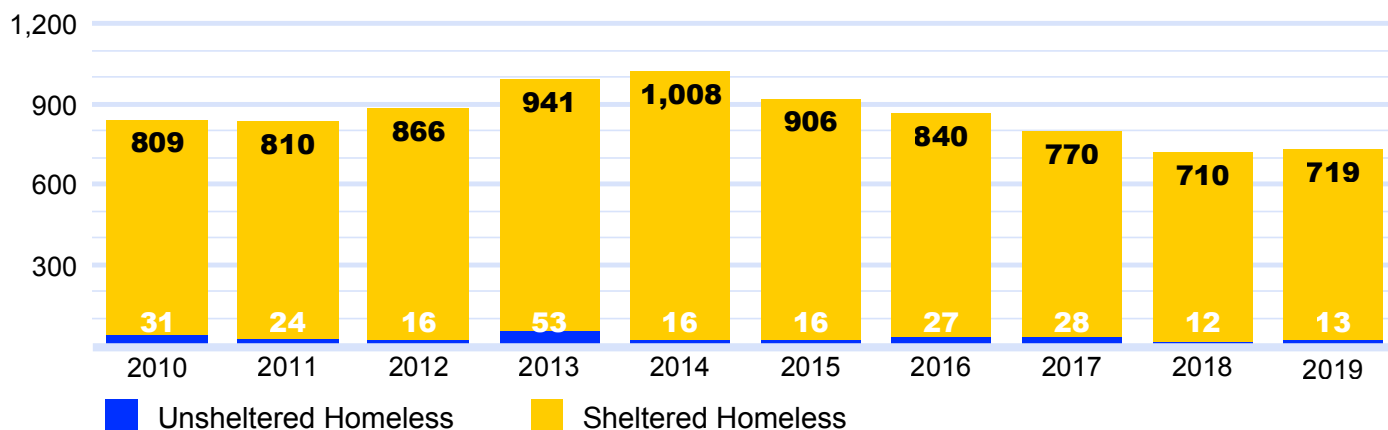
Shared community norms

Community norms developed in Greater Syracuse:

> We understand that homelessness is not a choice.

> We have high overall poverty, so understand it is close to everyone.

> We have a system that works (the CoC).

> Police are short-staffed, so it makes more sense to contact homeless outreach.

> We educate and promote what to do: call 211 or street outreach.

> We have police and elected leaders who believe in non-punitive approaches.

The Downtown Committee

The Downtown Committee, a business improvement district, provides security staff, maintenance teams, and a homelessness hotline. Its security personnel has adopted an engagement approach that is centered on, in the words of the security head, "what's best for individuals and who can provide it?" They have been trained to help individuals who are homeless avoid arrest by connecting them to services.

Greater Syracuse, NY Homelessness Trends

Chart: Homelessness counts by year (2010–2019), showing Unsheltered Homeless (blue) and Sheltered Homeless (yellow).

Year	Sheltered Homeless	Unsheltered Homeless
2010	809	31
2011	810	24
2012	866	16
2013	941	53
2014	1,008	16
2015	906	16
2016	840	27
2017	770	28
2018	710	12
2019	719	13

Unsheltered homelessness is rare and overall homelessness is declining

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

The Downtown Committee and others provide a public education campaign about panhandling and why people struggle. The campaign promotes the use of the Committee's hotline that deploys assistance to individuals who are believed to be homeless or otherwise experiencing difficult times.

Outreach teams

Two outreach teams engage with people at libraries, feeding programs, and other places frequented by homeless people and panhandlers who could be homeless or so entrenched in poverty that they are straddling a fine line between housing and homelessness. One of the outreach organizations, In My Fathers Kitchen, launched Hire Ground, a paid day labor program to offer alternatives to panhandling.

The van driver and a caseworker pick up and drop off participants at pre-determined job sites around the city. Participants earn $50 for five hours of work, with a meal and two breaks included.

Syracuse Police Department

The Syracuse Police Department recognizes that homelessness is not a reason for an arrest and that outreach and engagement are more effective strategies in reducing the prevalence of unsheltered homelessness. Law enforcement and many downtown businesses call 211 in lieu of arrest or aggressive move-along orders.

> **"We are a community—able to call anyone with questions, everyone is there to assist, working toward one common goal—ending homelessness."**
>
> *Megan Stuart*
> *Housing & Homeless Coalition of Central New York lead*

KEY LESSONS

Be passionate about helping people

Not only are providers eager, City, County, and Police Department personnel care profoundly and have a dedication to do more.

> Grounded beliefs in "homelessness is unacceptable" and "ending homelessness is possible."

> Create markers to rally around and promote a focus on helping people rather than protecting organizational agendas.

Be inclusive and collaborate

> Everyone can have a seat at CoC meetings and participate.

> Make communication a standard practice.

> The County and City have been at the table through the entire process and have been active in finding funding and trying to be good partners.

Educate people about reasons and solutions for homelessness

A new County Executive proposed an aggressive panhandling measure. Through education, he was convinced to take an alternative approach.

> Education and information need to be framed around "why panhandlers don't have jobs."

> The Mayor's summer book club featured Evicted by Matthew Desmond, which helped advance community compassion about homelessness.

Embrace Housing First approaches and provide multiple pathways out of homelessness

Take on "harder to house" people, including people who have been homeless for long periods of time and/or have behavioral health challenges, and create an environment that supports taking risks necessary to bring people from unsheltered situations into housing. Local top-down leadership and bottom-up commitments to Housing First are necessary for implementation. Greater Syracuse makes use of an array of options in rehousing individuals.

Equip outreach to get people from under bridge to housed

> Coordinate outreach to ensure a 24/7 response when needed.

> Empower and provide resources for outreach teams to make decisions and take action (e.g., not requiring multiple approvals before people can be housed).

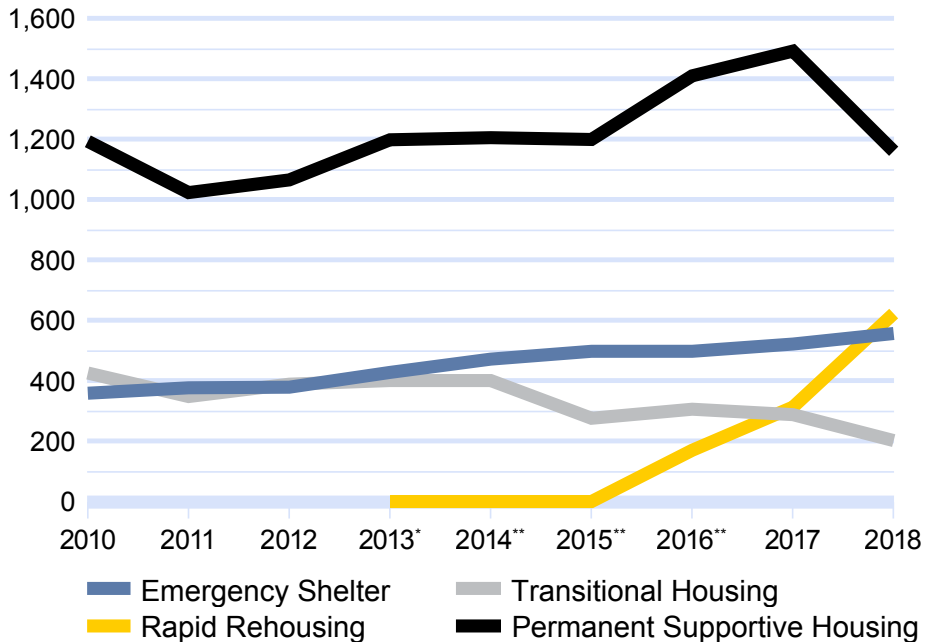## Use real-time data about who is homeless and the services they are receiving

Use a comprehensive, real-time, open Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) that supports prioritization, "by-name" lists, and case conferencing. HMIS supports case management and tapping into a network of organizations that can better meet the needs of individuals.

Develop a full-service 211 agency

Syracuse relies on 211 to deploy outreach staff to situations that are better handled as a "services-first" response.

> 24/7 response with skilled crisis intervention

> Reduces the need for a police response

Greater Syracuse, NY
Total Year-Round Beds Trends

Legend:
- Emergency Shelter
- Transitional Housing
- Rapid Rehousing
- Permanent Supportive Housing

Adding rapid rehousing has helped Syracuse keep overall and unsheltered homelessness low.

* 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/

> ❝We cannot arrest your way out of homelessness. Partnerships are better approach.❞

Richard F. Shoff, Jr.
Deputy Police Chief
Syracuse Police Department

OUTREACH DOES WHATEVER IT TAKES TO KEEP FORMERLY HOMELESS HOUSED

Gary was recently housed but returned to the Rescue Mission to see Jim Hawley who had helped him get an apartment. Gary was thinking about leaving his apartment and returning to the streets since he was hearing strange noises. Jim listened to a range of other concerns and offered Gary help getting them sorted out and to get a television. Jim noticed that Gary was cold and asked if he needed a coat. Gary said yes but it was afterhours for the Rescue Mission's clothing store. Jim said, "no problem, I have keys." Jim took Gary to pick out a coat. He happily selected a leather coat, thanked Gary and promised to meet him the next day.

Gary was recently housed but stopped by to see Jim Hawley, the outreach worker who had connected to him to housing.

CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACHES TO HOMELESSNESS AND INVESTMENT IN HOUSING AND SERVICES

Mayor Stephanie Miner has expressly rejected the criminalization of homelessness as a strategy for the city to address homelessness and has openly advocated for housing as an alternative. She has worked with others in the city, including the police force, to ensure that the city is pursuing constructive approaches to homelessness, and not punishing people for their visible poverty. Syracuse Mayor Miner even refused to follow a January 2016 order by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to arrest any homeless people who refused to enter into shelters. Rather than adopt this criminalizing approach, the Mayor has engaged in persistent outreach to people experiencing homelessness and connections to housing using a Housing First model. This has helped Syracuse become one of the nation's first cities to end veteran homelessness.

Housing Not Handcuffs
National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2016

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.

Arnold Ventures