



Three staff from the Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas (MHASCK) with a formerly chronically homeless tenant in front of his permanent supportive housing unit that is administered by MHASCK.

**WICHITA/SEDGWICK COUNTY, KANSAS**

# Big city with a small-town approach

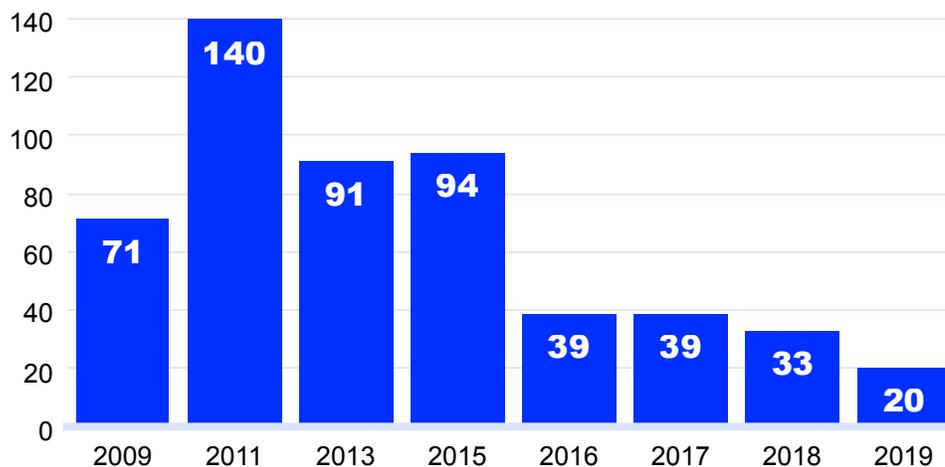
With a population of 390,000, Wichita is the largest city in Kansas and prides itself on its livability. Wichita has a favorable cost of living, a low unemployment rate, and housing that is more affordable and accessible than many other parts of Kansas and other cities of similar size. Despite this, almost half the renters in Wichita pay more than 30 percent of their income on rent.

The size of Wichita's overall homeless population is substantially smaller than comparable Midwestern cities. In 2019 its unsheltered population dropped to 57 people on a given night. Furthermore, the number of people who are chronically homeless (i.e., disabled and homeless for an extended period of time) dropped to 20, based on Point-in-Time (PIT) counts.

## HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

Wichita homeless services providers collectively take a Housing First approach, which prioritizes providing people with permanent housing as quickly and directly as possible.

# Chronic Homelessness in Wichita/Sedgwick County, KS: 2009-2019



Wichita’s chronically homeless population has steadily dropped since 2011—from a high of 140 to 20 in the most recent PIT count.

Source: 2009-2018 data: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>  
 2019 data: <http://www.unitedwayplains.org/the-2019-point-in-time-homeless-count-shows-a-39-percent-drop-in-chronically-homeless-persons-and-a-3-5-percent-increase-in-overall-homelessness>

**M**any of the gains made in reducing homelessness in Wichita come from a well-coordinated homeless services system (the Continuum of Care or CoC) led by United Way of the Plains. The Wichita Police Department, Sedgwick County Sheriff’s Office, and Kansas Department of Correction all participate in the CoC and in its range of homeless services.

## INNOVATIVE FEATURE:

## ADDRESSING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Based on PIT counts, the number of people designated as chronically homeless has fallen in Sedgwick County from 140 in 2011 to 20 in 2019. The reduction reflects efforts anchored in Sedgwick County’s 2008 The Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.<sup>1</sup> The plan was defined through local efforts coupled with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) guidelines.

People are considered chronically homeless when they can document extended periods of shelter stay and disability. The chronically homeless population uses disproportionately higher levels of services across systems. This subgroup overlaps substantially with the unsheltered homeless population. Targeting the chronically homeless population for housing focuses on those who are in the most need for both for supportive services and housing.

### The Plan to End Chronic Homelessness

- > Result of a taskforce put together jointly by the City of Wichita and Sedgwick County
- > Set blueprint in 2008 for subsequent efforts toward this goal that is still referred to in 2019
- > Provided impetus for ongoing City-County funding of 64 permanent supportive housing units
- > Provided impetus for an expanded drop-in center facility
- > Laid out framework for an oversight committee to coordinate efforts that target the chronically homeless subpopulation
- > Endorsed using a Housing First approach in addressing housing needs

## Adhering to HUD Best Practices for Reducing Chronic Homelessness

### STRONG LEADERSHIP

- > Strong leadership from Wichita’s homeless services CoC with political support from City and County government.
- > These governments use general funds to fund supportive housing.
- > Universal endorsement to provide housing using a Housing First model offering direct placement into housing and client-centered services.

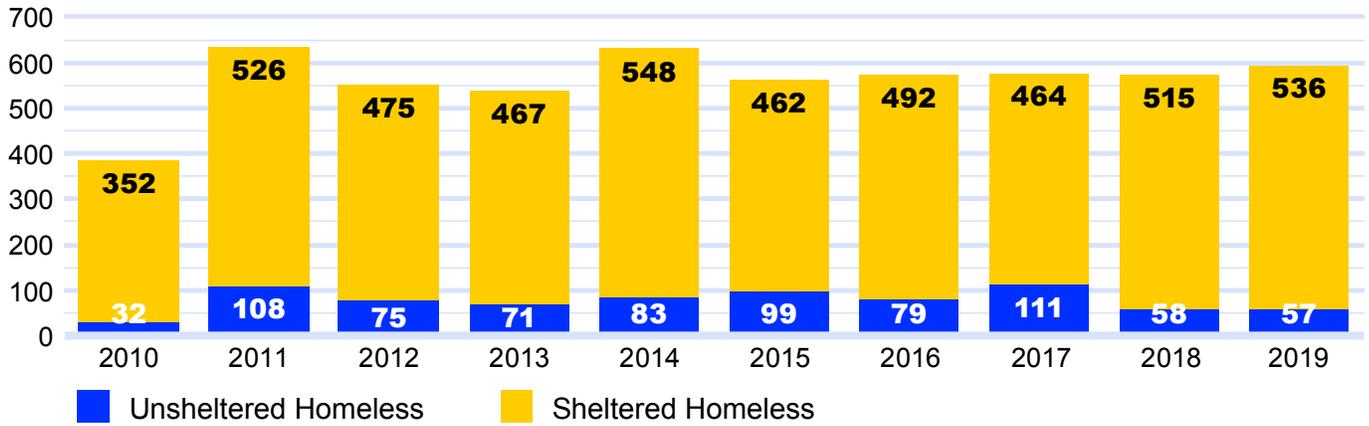
### “NO WRONG DOOR” APPROACH

- > Provide appropriate housing and services regardless of how people seek assistance.
- > Service providers have collectively produced a by-name list of all persons—the entire target population—designated as chronically homeless.
- > By-name list is the basis for collaboratively planning services and prioritizing housing placements.

### USING HOMELESS INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (HMIS)

- > Wichita has universal support from its services providers for their HMIS.
- > HMIS assists in documenting chronic homeless status and coordinating homeless services.

# Wichita/Sedgwick County, KS Homelessness Trends



As Wichita’s overall homeless population has remained steady, its unsheltered homeless numbers have substantially declined.

**Note:** Wichita did not conduct a 2010 PIT Count; 2010 numbers are duplicated 2009 PIT numbers

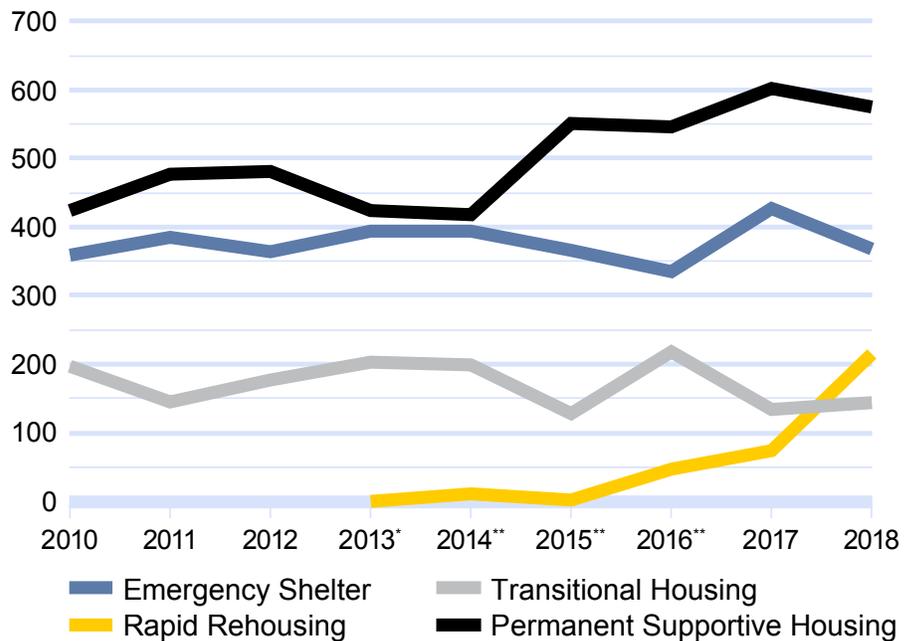
**Source:** <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>

## INNOVATIVE FEATURE: HOT: PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN HOMELESS SERVICES AND POLICE

Started in 2013 by the Wichita Police Department, the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) is a unit dedicated solely to homeless matters. HOT’s purpose is to avoid arrest or citation when there are no serious crimes involved and connect individuals experiencing homelessness with necessary services and housing. The core of HOT’s approach is to have police officers assume engagement and casework activities that are typically performed by homeless services organizations’ outreach teams while retaining their law enforcement capabilities.

The HOT team is staffed with 3–4 full-time police officers with adjustable hours to meet the needs of the homeless population. With a widely publicized dedicated phone number for matters involving homeless issues, the team responds to 40–60 service and 911 calls daily. They are the only police officers authorized to address situations involving the City’s anti-camping ordinance, and officers state they have yet to cite anyone for violating the ordinance.

## Wichita/Sedgwick County, KS Total Year-Round Beds Trends



Increases in permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing have come at the same time as unsheltered homeless numbers have gone down.

\* 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/>

HOT also provides direct aid to help persons find housing, including its “Finding A Way Home” travel grant program that reunites people with families or housing opportunities elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

The Wichita PD takes on the personnel costs related to HOT. The other \$10,000–\$20,000 of annual expenses are funded through private donations, and fundraising is one aspect of HOT activities.

**HOT collects data on persons with whom they engage and the types of assistance provided in a rudimentary spreadsheet database. With this, HOT maintains regularly updated tallies of services provided. Key outputs include assisting 1,062 persons in locating housing or relocated to stable housing from February 2013–March 2019. HOT makes their data available to CoC outreach providers, but does not participate in the CoC’s HMIS.**

## KEY LESSONS

### Collaboration is crucial

Many of those interviewed during the site visit recognized and prized the willingness and ability to work together—across sectors, systems, and programs—with one person describing a “small-town services approach in a big city.”

### Cultivate political will

- The chronic homelessness initiative was initiated at the behest of local City and County governments.
- Permanent supportive housing—provided with a Housing First approach—has received ongoing funding from local revenue as well as political support.
- The Wichita police, County sheriff, and State Department of Correction all have an active role in directly providing housing services for those they engage who are experiencing homeless.

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

- Wichita’s homeless services CoC has effectively translated models from elsewhere to the local context.
- Universally embrace a Housing First approach.
- The Wichita Police Department’s HOT is based on a model that originated in Colorado Springs and has been replicated in other jurisdictions.

### Use real-time data about who is currently homeless

- Use data to track and coordinate services.
- Use data to record outcomes.
- Data is a key component of both the law enforcement and chronic homelessness efforts featured here.

Officer Nate Schwiethale with ‘Tex,’ who was placed in housing through the efforts of Wichita’s CoC and the HOT team. PHOTO: KMUW



## 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 Sedgwick County’s plan is available at: <https://www.sedgwickcounty.org/media/22910/tech-plan.pdf>, and HUD describes its activities on chronic homelessness at: <https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/resources-for-chronic-homelessness/>.

2 More information on HOT is available at: <https://www.wichita.gov/WPD/FieldServices/Pages/HOTTeam.aspx>