

Emergency Shelter: Community Concerns and Best Practices

Presentation to the Anchorage Assembly
Work Session
March 31, 2022



Public Opinion

What are community members saying about
Emergency Shelter?

Most comments were centered around...

“There is no plan.”

lack of a **plan**,

“I voted for the mayor to develop a homeless plan.”

“I worked in the Sullivan and at Centennial we need to find a solution for something that works.”

“This should not be a homeless shelter; it should be considered for an emergency shelter in the event of a natural disaster.”

“Change the model... functional zero does not work.”

“Not what we need... time for a change.”

“You are kicking the can down the road; ask the Native Corporations to partner and help with this problem.”

fear & frustration with the system.

“People need personal responsibility for their actions; we are adding to the homeless industrial complex.”

“The reason this event is occurring is that there is an election coming up; this is about votes not helping.”

“Our elected officials are building a giant homeless business.”

“The Golden Lion has been a waste.”

“Tudor and Elmore facility is what is needed.”

“MOA should address the fencing code, covenants or community codes.”

Many individuals voiced their **fear, frustration, and the unknown** of what a permanent shelter would do to the community.

“We need to build a facility not a shelter that is focused on rehabilitation, domestic violence.”

“Shutting out the Alaska Native Voice; this is a political issue and substance abuse is the root cause.”

“We need to give them (homeless) a one-way ticket out of here.”

the belief that the root cause of homelessness is **substance misuse and/or mental illness,**

“I know a lot of homeless people it was awful what happened to the hockey rinks; these people have addiction and mental issues.”

“We need transitional living facilities; these people need to be held accountable.”

“Illegal drugs are the issue.”

“Do not need housing for the homeless.... they need a good stiff kick in the butt.”

“Students matter, and people experiencing homelessness matter; however, this is not the right location for a shelter.”

“I left [another place] due to the homeless.... they steal, litter, and carry respiratory diseases.”

“I am concerned for the children... there were a lot of fights, crime, sex, and garbage at Centennial Park last summer.”

“I have conflicting thoughts; I worry about the people who are homeless, and I am afraid about what will happen to the schools, parks, and businesses near the shelter.”

“A homeless person stole my wife’s purse; it also costs 60K to support a homeless person... It also costs over 200K to clean up the Sullivan Arena due to the damage caused.”

“I want a venue for fun and sports”

negative impacts on the community.

“This impacts our business and will divert new business and investment in this area.”

“They (homeless) tried to burn down the parks last year.”

“Criminals have taken over the trails near the Sullivan Arena; these people should not be coddled.”

“The police are not responding or responding fast enough.”

“I bring my children here; this should not be a shelter; we need to restructure what a shelter looks like.”

“I am dealing with break-ins from two suspicious people who hang out near the Campbell Creek trail.”

“We have more homeless in Mid-Town now; there is trash waste, impacting businesses.”

“I am worried about vagrants affecting the businesses.”

“The zoning laws written do not include a low barrier shelter; this is a community issue and requires integrated development.”

Q1 Share in 100 words or less, your biggest challenge when it comes to providing low-barrier shelter.

Answered: 122 Skipped: 0

Hard Increasing Run Fact Drug and Alcohol
Transportation Space Order Clients Substance
Low-barrier Shelter Staffing Staff
Policy Housing Aren't Challenge
Agency Families Screening Funding Youth
Emergency Shelter Circumstances Bed Length
Criminal

Anchorage is **not alone** in facing these challenges.*

*comments from providers around the country



Five Keys

TO EFFECTIVE EMERGENCY SHELTERS

Safety for the People Experiencing Homelessness
= Safety for the Neighborhood

“Shelter should be a place you
can imagine *yourself* going to
if you need it.”



ONE

Housing First Approach:

Align shelter eligibility criteria, policies, and practices with a housing first approach so that anyone experiencing homelessness can access shelter without prerequisites, make services voluntary, and assist people to access permanent housing options as quickly as possible.

An end to homelessness requires the **prevention of homelessness** whenever possible, **identification of and engagement** with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness or living in encampments to connect them to crisis services, as well as **pathways back to safe living arrangements or directly into housing** for people in emergency shelter, as well as for people who never enter emergency shelter.

To align a system that uses a Housing First approach, anyone experiencing homelessness should be able to enter shelter or any permanent housing intervention without prerequisites and services should be focused entirely on reconnecting people to housing as quickly as possible or stabilizing them in housing.

Emergency shelter should support **flow** from a housing crisis to housing stability, in which the aim of the system is to produce the most rapid and effective permanent housing connections for individuals and families facing crises.



TWO

Safe & Appropriate Diversion:

Provide diversion services to find safe and appropriate housing alternatives to entering shelter through problem-solving conversations, identifying and community supports, and offering lighter touch solutions.

Emergency shelters should be reserved for providing temporary housing for people facing crises who are seeking safety and/or have nowhere else to go. A growing number of communities are using targeted diversion strategies to decrease entries into homelessness and to quickly connect people who may be facing a housing crisis with a viable housing option *before* entering into emergency shelter. Effective diversion employs motivational interviewing strategies that focus on strengths and existing connections. If diversion is unsuccessful, these strategies can continue to be employed to connect people back to safe options quickly when possible.

Determining Other Viable Options. Diversion is a strategy that keeps people from entering emergency shelter, when possible, by helping them immediately identify alternate, safe housing arrangements (e.g., moving into a shared living arrangement with family members) and, if necessary, connecting them with services and financial assistance to help them return to permanent housing. Communities that are effectively employing diversion are often doing so with flexible financial assistance that allows them to quickly support pathways out of housing crises.

Some communities build diversion strategies into their coordinated entry processes as well as shelter intake procedures. Staff and volunteers are trained to emphasize the goal of helping people seeking shelter to find viable and safe housing options. Sometimes shelter diversion involves providing mediation and problem-solving support to determine if going back home is a safe alternative to emergency shelter entry. Other communities are proactively engaging people who have exited shelter and may be facing another housing crisis, offering targeted support and assistance before the crisis escalates to homelessness.



THREE

Immediate & Low-barrier Access:

Ensure immediate and easy access to shelter by lowering barriers to entry and staying open 24/7. Eliminate policies that make it difficult to enter shelter, stay in shelter, or access housing and income opportunities.

Create a more welcoming entry into shelter while still maintaining safety for participants and staff.

- Re-design the entry and security process to be more welcoming while prioritizing safety.
- Staff should greet participants as they enter instead of having participants being first greeted by security guards and metal detectors. This can create an institutional and punitive atmosphere and often creates more of a feeling of anxiety and an unhelpful power dynamic between staff and participants, rather than creating a safer environment. Staff can be trained on how to provide client safety services and security searches upon entry in a more respectful manner.
- If a shelter chooses to implement metal detectors or search of belongings, this should happen with the provision of amnesty totes. Otherwise, or in addition, use safety officers that are a trained part of the staff and understand the mission of the organization to end homelessness rather than traditional contracted security guards.
- The intention of safety officers is to have presence and circulate regularly throughout the facility while using engagement and non-violent de-escalation to deal with any issues as they come up.
- Safety officers are present to promote peace and safety, not to police the activity of shelter participants.

Eliminate shelter entry rules not necessary for the safety of residents and staff and have transparent behavioral expectations.

- Focus on behaviors and safety of shelter participants.
- It is fair, reasonable, and appropriate for the ARCH to have policies and procedures that inform service users that they cannot take weapons, alcohol or drugs into the building, and must turn over prescription medications for safe storage when in the shelter and receiving services.





Housing- focused, Rapid Exit Services:

Focus services in shelters on assisting people in accessing permanent housing options as quickly as possible.

The determined goal of shelter should be clear and guide the design of how it operates and how services are delivered. A shelter will produce the outcomes for which it is designed. Ideally, emergency shelters should be a part of a crisis response system's process for getting someone housed as quickly as possible, not serve as a destination or as a solution for homelessness.

Shelters can serve various purposes. One type of shelter may have the goal of managing homelessness. This type of shelter provides temporary shelter and meets basic needs for individuals and/or families. A shelter designed to meet this goal provides a place to sleep for the night, provides basic needs such as showers and bathrooms, laundry, and mail services, as well as self-directed resources, information, and referrals. This is the current model of Emergency Cold Weather Shelter for single adults in Anchorage.

A shelter designed to end homelessness has as its goal the permanent resolution of a household's housing crisis. Shelter services are designed to assist in facilitating self-resolution, re-house households quickly, and reduce unsheltered homelessness. Shelters designed to achieve these goals do so by creating increased flow in the system by housing people more quickly, connecting households to coordinated entry, and connecting households to housing search and other resources to help them stabilize once housed.



FIVE

Data To Measure Performance:

Measure data on the percentage of exit to housing, the average length of stay in a shelter, and returns to homelessness to evaluate the effectiveness of shelter and improve outcomes.

Key performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of shelter and the shelter system include:

- Increased exits to permanent housing
- Decreased length of stay in shelter
- Reduction in returns to homelessness

In addition to the above key performance measures, all shelters within the system should track monthly performance measures including:

- Total number of beds (i.e. unaccompanied individuals and/or families)
- Total unique households served
- Total households entering shelter
- Total households exiting
- Total households exiting to permanent housing Average length of shelter stay in days for all households exiting the shelter to any destination
- Average length of shelter stay in days for all households exiting to a permanent housing destination
- Total household stayers (those households who entered in previous months and did not exit this month)

Performance should be monitored regularly because shelter performance impacts the entire crisis response system. It is important that the data and narrative of operations and service delivery match as data illustrates need, capacity, local coordination, and the strategies taken to end homelessness. Ensuring performance data is used for strategic decision making ensures improved system performance and more participants served with best practices.

A blue backpack is centered in the background, resting on a wooden deck. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Consistent | Reliable | Available

Services are not effective without housing, but housing is not sustainable without services. **Shelter is a beginning, not an end.**

Shelter is

a safe place

a safe place to **sleep**

a safe place to **eat**

a safe place to **access help**

a safe place to **take a shower**

a safe place **with rules**

a safe place to **access housing services**





What does effective emergency shelter look like to you? Scan the code to take a short survey.