

# Investment in Regional Approaches Will Maximize Impact in Reducing Homelessness

A white paper submission on behalf of the San Francisco Bay Area Working Group on Regional Homelessness, developed for the California Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council by HomeBase/Center for Common Concerns

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California has almost one-quarter of the nation's homeless population, double the state's portion of the overall U.S. population. The percentage of those experiencing homelessness who are unsheltered (69%) and chronically homeless (26%) are the highest among the fifty states.<sup>1</sup> This is despite California leading the nation in number of permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing beds, and being second only to New York State (which includes New York City with its right-to-shelter mandate) for the overall number of temporary beds.<sup>2</sup> To better address the level of need, the State of California has allocated new funding and is now rightly looking to understand how best to prioritize these resources to maximize impact on reducing the numbers of people who experience homeless across all sub-populations.

A regional approach to homelessness has the potential to coordinate local responses to improve outcomes and impact. Regional approaches to public policy are typically pursued to address complicated, border-transcending problems in need of comprehensive and collective action. They respond to the reality that localities are ever more interconnected; share key aspects of economic, political and social context; and experience significant crossflows of people, information, goods, services, and money. Local issues are transformed into regional ones by the recognition that "we're all in this together" and that cooperation and collaboration are necessary, as no single locality or entity is in charge of all the levers needed to resolve the problem.

Homelessness clearly falls into this category. It is the product of the intersection of housing market failures; economies with too many low-wage jobs; lack of adequate investment in education, health, and mental health services; and inadequate re-entry planning by the criminal justice and healthcare systems, none of which are specific to any one locality. The effectiveness of collaboration and coordination in addressing this issue is widely acknowledged. In 1996, HUD began requiring communities to come together to submit a single comprehensive Continuum of Care (CoC) application in order to access homeless assistance funding, and since then has used its annual CoC Program Competition to promote increased levels of systemwide infrastructure, data collection and planning. This has resulted in new levels of coordination, across providers within a community, across counties and their cities, and in a few areas, across multiple counties. An early evaluation of Continuums of Care concluded that HUD's adoption of the CoC

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<sup>1</sup> 2018 PIT Counts by State; available at: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>.

<sup>2</sup> 2018 HIC Data by State; available at: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>. Temporary beds include emergency shelter, transitional housing, and safe haven beds.

as a way to distribute its competitive homeless assistance dollars “has moved communities further in the direction of broad planning and program development” and that “the ensuing networks of programs and services have been able to offer more support to homeless people, with more cohesion, than would otherwise have been possible.”<sup>3</sup>

In California, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) is an example of a regional approach to homelessness, encompassing Los Angeles County and most of its 85 cities. LAHSA has made clear gains in advancing a cohesive vision and goals for addressing homelessness, along with joint metrics for measuring progress. It has effectively raised the visibility of this effort; attracted resources and built partnerships; and forged agreement on priority needs, thus facilitating greater impact through strategic allocation of resources.

Other regions of the state can benefit as well from a strategic regional approach. Using a regional lens to address the issue of homelessness fosters important cross-jurisdictional and cross-sector perspectives, cultivates innovative multi-faceted solutions, and promotes economies of scales and efficiency in resource utilization.

### **The San Francisco Bay Area is Ripe For a Regional Approach to Homelessness**

San Francisco Bay Area homelessness is a regional challenge that cannot be solved by any county or city alone. Its nine counties<sup>4</sup> are inextricably linked together by factors such as the economy, housing, transportation, and environmental health. Because of these connections, shifts in any of these factors in one Bay Area county significantly impact the rest. Even during periods of substantial economic growth in one county, the interconnected nature of the Bay Area can result in such growth causing deleterious effects on many Bay Area residents, particularly those who are not directly benefiting from the increase in prosperity. Nowhere are these impacts more starkly observed than in the context of housing and homelessness.

#### *The Ripple Effect of Increased Wealth and Decreased Affordable Housing Across the Region*

The Bay Area is facing a severe homelessness crisis. With 28,621 people experiencing homelessness on a single night in 2018, this region has the third largest homeless population in the country, trailing only New York City (78,676) and Los Angeles (49,955). In addition, the Bay Area has, by far, the greatest number of homeless unaccompanied youth age 25 and under in our country, and is second only to Los Angeles for the size of its chronic homeless population. With 68% of the population unsheltered, living in places such as encampments, abandoned building and vehicles, the Bay Area’s homeless crisis is also highly visible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Urban Institute and ICF Consulting, “Evaluation of Continuums of Care”, prepared for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> The San Francisco Bay Area is commonly defined as the following nine counties: [Alameda](#), [Contra Costa](#), [Marin](#), [Napa](#), [San Francisco](#), [San Mateo](#), [Santa Clara](#), [Solano](#), and [Sonoma](#).

<sup>5</sup> 2018 PIT Counts by State; available at: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>

Over the last two decades, rapid growth of wealth, especially in Silicon Valley and San Francisco, has impacted the entire region, turning it into one of the most expensive places to live in the country. A 2017 study concluded that six of the nine Bay Area counties comprise the six most expensive jurisdictions in the United States,<sup>6</sup> and the Bay Area's rental market is, by far, one of the most costly in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Coupled with decades of under-producing housing in spite of a rapidly expanding economy, the surge in the Bay Area's cost of living created an unworkable housing environment for many of its residents. Between 2010 and 2016, the Bay Area added 500,000 jobs and only 50,000 housing units.<sup>8</sup> The impact of this mismatched growth hit home with all but the wealthiest Bay Area residents: of the housing produced, new housing for those unable to work, low-wage workers, and even those of moderate incomes was drastically lower than their housing need.<sup>9</sup> This decrease in appropriate and available housing exacerbated the economic inequities experienced in the Bay Area as a result of rapid job growth, and has been one of the major drivers of homelessness.

The magnitude of the Bay Area's homelessness crisis is obvious to observers from both inside and outside of the region. In 2018, a visiting United Nations Special Rapporteur observed that conditions imposed on homeless San Francisco and Oakland (Alameda County) encampment residents constituted cruel and inhuman treatment and violated multiple human rights.<sup>10</sup> Bay Area residents also overwhelmingly recognize the need for more action to stem homelessness in the region: according to a 2018 poll, Bay Area residents rank homelessness behind only housing costs/availability (which is closely related to homelessness) and traffic congestion as the region's leading problem, and the number of residents who believe homelessness is the region's top problem has nearly tripled since 2015.<sup>11</sup> This is evidence of an emerging consensus throughout the region that something more must be done.

### *Inter-County Mobility and Connection Call for an Inter-County Response*

While Bay Area denizens, including those experiencing homelessness, may have a primary residence in one jurisdiction, they also live within the entire region and are affected by regional dynamics. People routinely cross jurisdictional lines as they travel to work, access services, change residences, and transition out of institutions. Long-standing Bay Area collaboration to provide regional local transportation increases this mobility for residents and reinforces a regional lifestyle. In addition, trends in any single Bay Area locality produce a resounding ripple effect across the entire region. Natural disasters, costs of housing, criminalization of

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<sup>6</sup> The Non-profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH), *On Track Together: Housing and Transportation - Building the Bay Area's Vibrant, Sustainable, and Affordable Future Together*, June 2017, page 8, available at: [https://nonprofithousing.org/OnTrackTogether/?mc\\_cid=bab3503ed5&mc\\_eid=1341b83c0c](https://nonprofithousing.org/OnTrackTogether/?mc_cid=bab3503ed5&mc_eid=1341b83c0c)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* page 9

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* page 10

<sup>9</sup> CASA Committee to House the Bay Area (CASA), *CASA Compact: A 15-Year Emergency Policy Package to Confront the Housing Crisis in the San Francisco Bay Area*, January 2019, page 15, available at: [https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/CASA\\_Compact.pdf](https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/CASA_Compact.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context*, page 12, available at: <https://www.undocs.org/A/73/310/rev.1>

<sup>11</sup> 2018 Bay Area Council, conducted by EMC Research; available at: <http://documents.bayareacouncil.org/2018bacpoll1.pdf>

homelessness, encampment strategies, and local policy: the circumstances and decisions of each jurisdiction, made in isolation, dramatically affect the whole region.

Despite this regional context, the homeless response systems established by Bay Area counties, are not coordinated beyond county lines. This is largely due to the entrenched consequences of state and federal program design. Currently, there is no ability to align – or even track – the care and resources individuals receive across jurisdictions, no ability to monitor outcomes, and no ability to optimize regional resources to meet regional needs. While Bay Area communities invest millions of dollars to monitor, coordinate, and prioritize their services within counties, the siloed nature of these systems create significant barriers to regional coordination. For the people who are experiencing homelessness in the San Francisco Bay Area, the lack of coordination creates a tragic void in their safety net. Crossing county lines means erasure of their entire service history, losing access to the programs and providers who may have helped them in the past and the benefits and resources that supported survival day-to-day. At best, this means starting over. At worst, it means falling through the cracks entirely.

Given the regional face of homelessness in the Bay Area, an effective response must be regional as well. This means coordination to ensure crucial resources are accessible to people experiencing homelessness regardless of where they are geographically located in the Bay Area. Accomplishing this requires investing in collective impact at the regional level to right-size resources, align local policies, and ensure the full spectrum of crisis response, treatment, and supportive housing is available to Bay Area residents who need it. Doing so would take advantage of the collective synergy of the Bay Area to leverage resources across the region to overcome local obstacles and increase efficiency and positive outcomes, and optimize the opportunities available through state funding streams such as HEAP, CESH and No Place Like Home.

The Bay Area has a long history of regional collaboration to advance collective interests and build efficient, resilient systems. For decades, regional agencies, such as the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), have operated with jurisdictions across the Bay's nine counties. The Bay Area also has a long history of being a hotbed for innovation in our country. Currently, the combination of the high visibility of the homeless population, the acute housing crisis, and the increased focus on data sharing and system thinking, has resulted in momentum for integrating local efforts into a regional homelessness system. Building on these assets, the Bay Area has the opportunity to create a new national standard for coordination and effectiveness in solving one of our country's most crucial social issues.

### **An Initial Vision for Bay Area Regional Action**

A San Francisco Bay Area response to homelessness is already being initiated. Leaders from across the Bay Area have begun meeting and developing an ambitious vision for regional coordination. The goal is to be able to share data and information across county lines; align systems to develop and deploy resources in a strategic and coordinated way; raise the visibility

of the regional effort to attract resources and build public support; and coordinate advocacy for federal, state and local policies that will support regional success in addressing homelessness. The following are the key components that have been identified for a Bay Area regional response to homelessness.

### *I. Regional Planning Body*

Recognizing that a regional solution is the most sustainable – and indeed only – path to truly solving the crisis of homelessness in the San Francisco Bay Area, Bay Area leaders have committed to transcending the jurisdictional barriers that undermine coordination. In 2018, top leaders from across Bay Area homeless systems of care formed the Bay Area Regional Working Group, staffed and facilitated by HomeBase, and began convening on a quarterly basis, with the goal of fostering a shared regional vision for impact.

The Working Group, which includes decision-makers from several Bay Area counties and Big 11 cities in the region, has established a governance charter, launched a data subcommittee to develop a data-sharing proof of concept, and identified essential next steps to achieve regional progress.

### *II. Regional Data Sharing*

Key to developing a coordinated regional response is the ability to analyze, share and integrate data across the Bay Area. Data sharing is essential to the development of a true picture of homelessness in the Bay Area, including information about trends, gaps, needs and outcomes. This regional understanding will support development of innovative and targeted policies at the regional and local levels to respond to regional needs and to the mobility of the Bay Area's homeless population, and it will strengthen strategic resource allocation and deployment, maximizing efficient and effective use of limited resources.

Currently, each Bay Area county invests millions of dollars annually to maintain a fully independent and isolated Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The result is duplication of a very large-but-undefined number of homeless clients in multiple HMIS databases across the Bay Area, with no ability to leverage information about trends, care coordination, service redundancy, or outcomes.

The Bay Area Working Group is currently developing a data-sharing proof of concept analyzing data from multiple counties' HMIS to better understand regional homelessness, demonstrate the tremendous potential of regional data sharing and pursue a regional data warehouse. Next steps will entail the development of a data-sharing feasibility study and implementation plan and then drafting of data-sharing protocols, release of information forms, and other operational documents.

### *III. Regional Action Plan and Cross-Jurisdictional Alignment*

A regional action plan will provide a common blueprint to guide collective action across jurisdictions and address problems stemming from fragmentation. Currently, as people experiencing homelessness flow in and out of counties, take shelter on regional public transportation, and individually access systems of care in multiple communities, the challenges of ensuring they receive the expeditious and streamlined assistance needed to exit homelessness are compounded. Too often, resources are duplicated or not available where they are needed, eligibility criteria vary across jurisdictions, and those who are highly vulnerable and most in need continue to cycle through gaps between systems rather than being prioritized for assistance.

The cities and counties of the Bay Area have developed a broad range of infrastructure to respond to homelessness. But the siloed nature of these developments within individual jurisdictions has resulted in a dramatic range of programs and service definitions and criteria, and yielded areas of service deserts and service density – all of which exacerbate inflow/outflow, create inefficiency, and undermine coordination and positive outcomes. A regional approach, with planning and system alignment across jurisdictions, will be better able to take advantage of the collective resources and innovation of the Bay Area to build a truly right-sized regional system of care.

#### Demographics Analysis, Systems Map & Gaps Analysis

The Regional Working Group has identified development of a regional demographic analysis, systems map, and gaps analysis of programs and resources as first steps toward better regional alignment and planning. This will provide a data-informed regional picture of homelessness, identifying misalignment between the Bay Area's independent county systems of care, such as variations in eligibility criteria, service definitions, and data collection metrics; revealing need-based service gaps; and highlighting strategic opportunities for coordination.

Based on a clearer understanding of regional inflow and outflow and of available housing and services, Bay Area leaders will be able to better identify how to align policy, programs, and resources to more efficiently end homelessness for people crossing jurisdictional borders and take informed steps to mitigate impacts from this high volume cross-border movement. It will also assist them to effectively prioritize resources across the region, optimize spending, and harness strengths and opportunities across jurisdictions to overcome localized barriers. A key benefit of a regional approach is that problems intractable in one community can be solved by another. Communities lacking space for housing and program development but with resources to spend can team with communities who lack funding but have available land. Small communities without the volume of need to support specialized programs for vulnerable, multiple need sub-populations can coordinate regionally for access to these services for their residents.

## Regional Action Plan

Development of a regional action plan, informed by the foregoing analysis, and developed through participative planning committees will help to build consensus on priorities and needed action. The planning committees will be composed of key stakeholders representing all jurisdictions and receiving input from the homeless, housing, transportation, health and behavioral health care, and criminal justice systems, as well as the private sector and people with lived experience of homelessness. The action plan will lay out a framework for ongoing regional collaboration, outlining regional goals along with tangible steps for achieving them. It will coordinate strategies across jurisdictions to better achieve collective regional impact, build on regional strengths by leveraging resources across county lines, enhance efficiency by reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication in infrastructure and operations, and support local leadership and policy aligned with the regional vision.

### *IV. Regional Advocacy*

With a fuller understanding of the face of homelessness regionally and agreement on needs and priorities, Bay Area leaders will be positioned to take unified action to promote a common agenda. This includes acting together to communicate to state and federal policy makers about what is needed to support Bay Area success in solving homelessness as well as working to enact parallel local policy changes to unify the region and overcome local barriers to an effective homeless response. It also involves coordinated regional messaging and public education to build support for regional action, and it encompasses collective efforts to secure public and private funding to support the regional agenda. The goal is to harness the frustration and energy of the Bay Area community into proactive engagement around solutions, and to build support and momentum for a regional system that can successfully resolve the homelessness crisis.

### **How the State Can Support Regional Action in the Bay Area**

Building a regional approach to homelessness will require investment in planning, infrastructure and technology. State resources can help to underwrite these efforts, providing key support to get these initiatives off the ground. The Bay Area Regional Working Group has identified several areas where support is needed to help carry the current momentum to fruition. These include:

- ✓ Regional data-sharing, including feasibility study, system design and development, and implementation support.
- ✓ Regional system mapping and data analysis to provide an in-depth picture of regional gaps, resources, and opportunities for policy alignment.
- ✓ Regional planning process to develop a regional action plan, communication strategy, and policy platform.

Given that the San Francisco Bay Area contains almost one-quarter of the State's homeless population, any State effort to impact homelessness must seriously consider the needs of the region. Bay Area leaders have identified a regional approach as essential to being able to move the needle on reducing homelessness. As a region bound together not just by geography but also by economic, social, and political ties, it is ripe for regional action on homelessness. Importantly, there is energy and interest behind such a regional approach, even as there are related regional efforts underway to address housing and transportation needs.

Piloting a regional approach in the Bay Area, where there is already a strong regional identity, will also provide lessons and models for other areas of the State where coordinating efforts across jurisdictions makes sense. It also will provide the State with a place to workshop and test other cross-county initiatives, including data-sharing and opportunities for leveraging scarce resources in rural regions of California.

### About HomeBase

HomeBase, the facilitator of the Bay Area Regionalism Initiative, brings many decades of experience building effective systems and promoting collective impact in addressing homelessness.

HomeBase is a nationally recognized expert on homelessness and a skilled organizer and facilitator. For over 30 years, HomeBase has worked at the local, state and federal levels to build systems that implement innovative and proven best practices in ending homelessness. Our deep connections to the communities where we work enable us to remain grounded in the needs, concerns, and priorities of local stakeholders, translating policy and cutting-edge opportunities to practical realities.