

Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz



A Strategic Framework for Addressing
Homelessness in Santa Cruz County

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page features a large yellow semi-circle representing a sun rising over three stylized houses. The houses are colored white, pink, and red from left to right, each with a teal roof and a dark blue base. Above the houses is a horizontal line of small yellow squares. The background is a solid blue color.

January 2024
to January 2027

Our Mission

Strong collaborative action to ensure all residents within the County have stable, safe, and healthy places to live.

Who We Are

The Housing for Health Division was created in November 2020 within the County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department to support the implementation of this Framework by bringing together a coalition of partners and resources to prevent and end homelessness within our County.



Overview

Homelessness severely impacts the health and quality of life of those living without homes and the entire community. The County of Santa Cruz, cities within the county, and community members recognize the need for strong collaborative action to ensure all county residents have stable, safe, and healthy places to live.

The County and its partners created the Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz County Strategic “Framework” through a collaborative process that used the experience, knowledge, and input of a broad set of community stakeholders including cities, non-profit organizations, County departments, and people with lived experiences of homelessness. Work on the original Framework began in March 2019 with a review of current local efforts and data on homelessness, along with an evaluation and discussion of experiences in other communities. The first Framework covered the period of January 2021 to January 2024. This updated version incorporates input gathered from multiple community forums held in early 2024.

The Framework outlines coalition action steps that support continued reductions in unsheltered and overall homelessness countywide over the next three years. The County Human Services Department’s Housing for Health Division will continue to provide leadership and the backbone administrative support for the implementation of this Framework.

The updated Framework sets ambitious goals based on federal Housing and Urban Development standards for high-performing communities. These standards include:

- Reducing the length of time people experience homelessness
- Reducing returns to homelessness
- Ensuring we collect data from 80% or more of housing and service programs that work with those experiencing homelessness
- Documenting a comprehensive outreach plan among all the cities and county government departments to streamline access to housing and service resources for people experiencing homelessness

The updated Framework also calls for:

- Continued annual reductions in the number of people experiencing homelessness according to the annual Point-In-Time Count
- Supporting all jurisdictions in the County with meeting their Regional Housing Needs Allocation Very Low-Income housing production goals

Background

In 2022, California had the highest rate of homelessness in the United States, with 44 people experiencing homelessness out of every 10,000 people in the state. Vermont, Oregon, and Hawaii also had very high rates, with 43, 42, and 41 people per 10,000, respectively. Within California, Santa Cruz County has the fourth highest rate of homelessness at 87 per 10,000 residents. Only Humboldt, San Francisco and Mendocino counties have higher rates, with 122, 96, and 92 per 10,000, respectively.

Every day, thousands of people in Santa Cruz County live without stable shelter or a home. The 2023 Homeless Point-in-Time Count found 1,804 people experiencing homelessness on a single night, representing 1,373 distinct households experiencing homelessness. Three out of four households experiencing homelessness were housed within the County prior to becoming homeless.



Across the country and in Santa Cruz County, homelessness disproportionately impacts specific groups of individuals including certain racial and ethnic groups, youth exiting foster care, seniors and people with disabilities, individuals with behavioral health conditions, single parent households, veterans, people with criminal backgrounds, and individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and two-spirit (LGBTQ2S).

High rates of homelessness among subgroups of extremely low-income households reflect broad historical and present-day social, economic, political, and cultural forces that contribute to these disparities.

Approaches to addressing homelessness must understand and address some of the forces contributing to these disparate impacts.

What is Causing Homelessness in Our Community?



1

Housing affordability gap



2

Health issues

3

Lack of
supportive
connections

4

Loss of
hope and
sense of
purpose



5

1

Housing Affordability Gap **Housing Costs Exceed Incomes**

The larger the gap between incomes and housing costs in a region, the greater the risk of homelessness and housing instability in a community. This is a major factor contributing to homelessness across the United States.

The California Housing Partnership estimates over 6,600 renter households in Santa Cruz County do not have access to an affordable home. Among these households living with the lowest incomes, 54% pay more than 50% of their income toward housing. This group is the most likely to experience housing instability, overcrowded or unsafe living conditions, and homelessness. Within this group are people living on fixed incomes such as seniors and people with disabilities, as well as, unemployed, underemployed, and employed individuals who cannot afford local housing costs.

The 2023 Santa Cruz County Point-In-Time Count of persons experiencing homelessness found 28% reported being employed at the time of the survey. Employment itself cannot prevent homelessness when wages are not high enough to cover housing costs.

This Framework calls for implementing a range of strategies that support reducing housing costs and increasing household incomes.



2

Health Issues Impacting Living Situations

Some health conditions impact a person's ability to manage daily living tasks essential to keeping a home. For example, a person with dementia may struggle to remember to pay their rent. The stressors associated with housing instability and homelessness can exacerbate health conditions and create new ones. Based on 2023 survey data from Santa Cruz County, half of people experiencing homelessness have a disabling health condition that interferes with their ability to get and keep housing. Substance use disorder and mental health conditions impact an estimated 46% and 39% of people experiencing homelessness. Chronic health conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure impact nearly one-third of the population. Studies have found the average life span of a person experiencing homelessness is 15-20 years less than the general population.

2

Health Issues Impacting Living Situations (cont.)

Health care systems, services and associated policies influence levels of housing instability, institutionalization and homelessness within a community. This Framework calls for implementing a range of policy and program changes to address the health care needs of people at-risk of or currently experiencing homelessness. This includes connecting people to holistic services, supports and treatment that address both their health and daily living needs.

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3

Lack of Supportive Connections

Loss or Absence of Strengthening Relationships

The absence or loss of supportive relationships can contribute to housing instability and loss, particularly in areas with large housing affordability gaps. Histories of traumatic events and relationships, in both childhood and adulthood, are prevalent at far higher rates among people experiencing homelessness compared to the general population. The 2023 Santa Cruz County Point-In-Time count of homeless persons, found:

39% were living with friends or relatives before becoming homeless

10% reported family/domestic violence as a primary event leading to their homelessness

13% identified a divorce, separation, or breakup as a primary cause

This Framework calls for implementing a range of strategies that help grow long-term and broadly supportive relationships for those experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness.

4

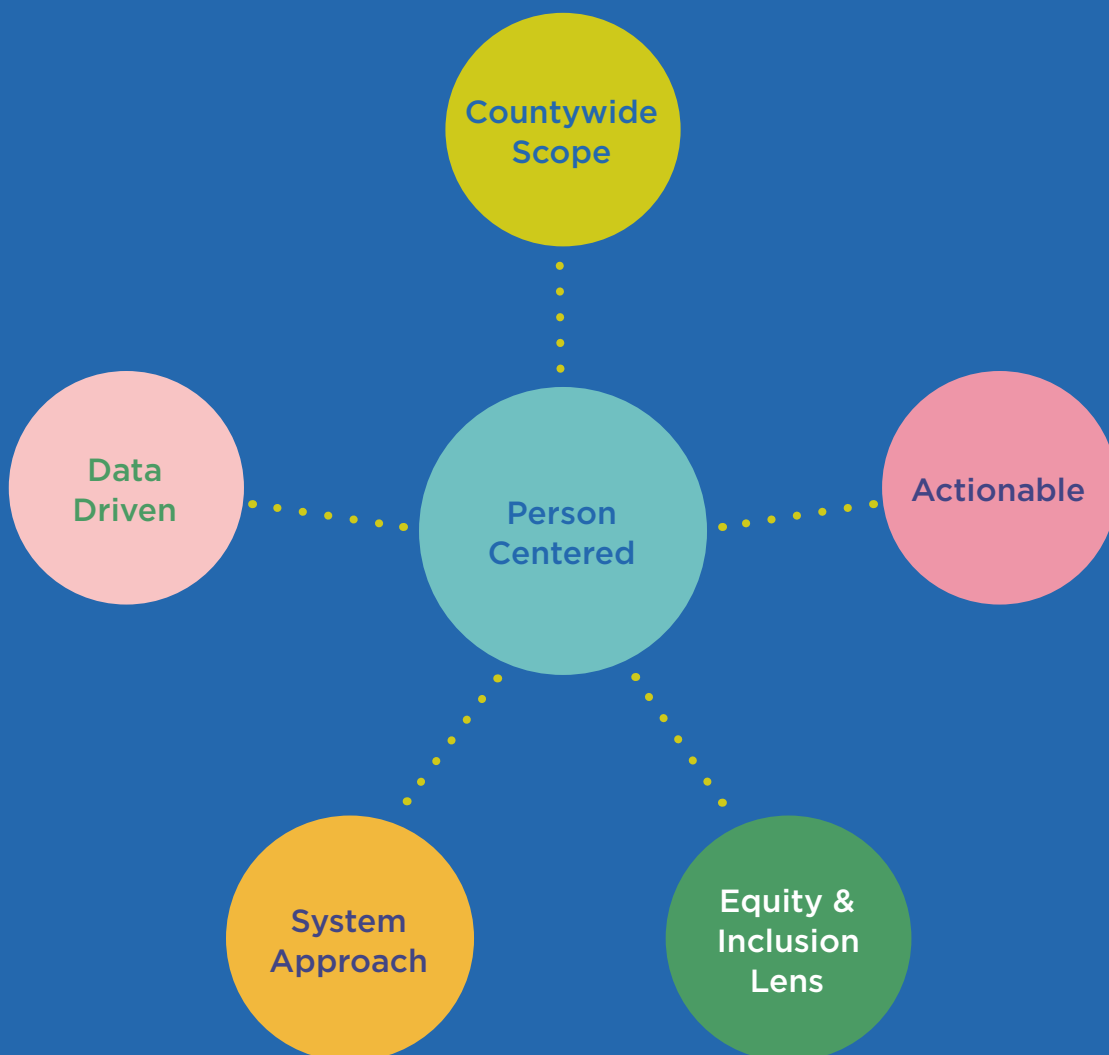
Loss of Hope and Sense of Purpose

A loss of hope and sense of purpose, at the community and/or individual level, can contribute to events that compromise a stable living situation and lead to prolonged episodes of homelessness. Living without a home can be a profoundly stigmatizing and isolating event.

This Framework calls for implementing a range of strategies that enhance feelings of hope and meaning among community members, people experiencing homelessness, and those working to make a difference in their lives.

Our Vision

To align and develop the array of resources, stakeholders, and collective wisdom across the greater Santa Cruz community to promote public health and make significant impacts on the crisis of homelessness, benefiting all residents, particularly those without homes.





**Person
Centered**

People experiencing homelessness are experts about their own goals, priorities, and support needs. Housing and services coordinated by the housing crisis response system must center around the self-identified needs and goals of people seeking support.



**Countywide
Scope**

Homelessness occurs in all parts of Santa Cruz County, whether urban, suburban, agricultural, or rural. Implementation of this Framework will address each area of the community and develop appropriate solutions to homelessness. Geographic equity must be at the center of this framework.



Data Driven

Decisions about programs, resources, and approaches must be informed by high quality, well-understood qualitative and quantitative data about the system and its outcomes for the people it serves, including measures of disparities and inequity.



**System
Approach**

A coordinated system approach that streamlines access to housing and services will maximize efforts to address homelessness.



**Equity &
Inclusion Lens**

Certain subgroups of people experience higher rates of homelessness. Efforts undertaken through this Framework will work to eliminate disparities in access and outcomes within the housing crisis response system.



Actionable

This Framework must result in actionable steps. It must be understood, implemented, and evaluated with the resources available and with clear responsibilities and accountability. System leaders and stakeholders will regularly review progress and update plans to ensure continued progress towards meeting goals and targets.

Our Goals

Our overall goal remains to substantially reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness within the County, as measured by the annual Point-in-Time count of persons experiencing homelessness.

In the next three years, the Framework calls for our community to reach “High Performing Community” goals established by the federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Department:

Core Goal #1 Reduce the length of time people experience homelessness

The Housing for Health Division and its partners will oversee a robust effort to improve the effectiveness of all programs and interventions for people experiencing homelessness. This includes shortening the amount of time people remain unhoused or in programs prior to securing housing. HUD High Performing Communities decrease the length of time people experience homelessness by at least 10% each year with a goal of getting to 20 days or less. In the federal fiscal year 2023 (October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2023), local Homeless Management Information System data indicates the average length of time people experienced homelessness across all programs was 894 days or nearly 2.5 years.

Core Goal #2 Reduce the percentage of people returning to homelessness

When local housing and service programs help individuals move from homelessness back into stable housing, we need to work together to ensure that people can maintain their housing over the long term. HUD High Performing Communities monitor the percentage of people that return to homelessness within two years of exiting a program to permanent housing. High Performing Communities reduce the percentage of people returning to homelessness by 20% each year with a goal of 5% or less of people returning to homelessness within two years of exiting a program. In the federal fiscal year 2023 (October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2023), local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data indicates that 15% of households that exited to permanent housing returned to homelessness within two years.

Core Goal #3 **Ensure our local data captures information on program outcomes and community needs**

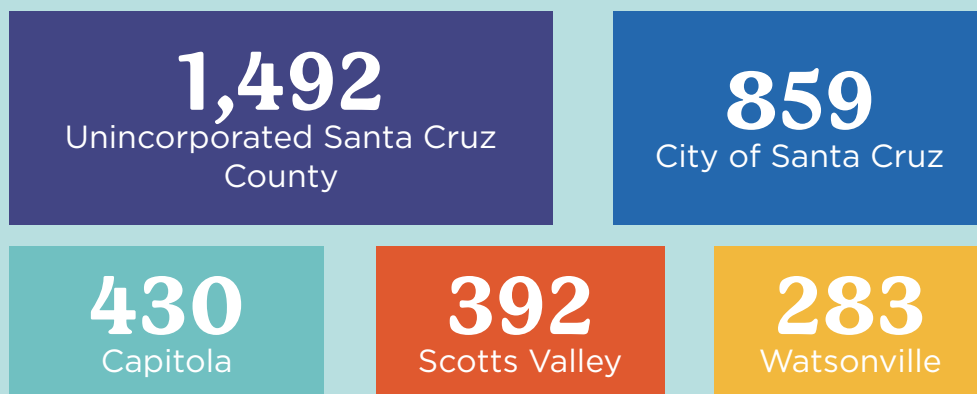
According to federal and state standards, the Homeless Management Information System is the primary data system local communities should utilize for tracking efforts to prevent and end homelessness, including, housing and services program outcomes, utilization, participant demographics and needs. HUD High Performing Communities have 80% or more of local programs that contribute to addressing homelessness entering data into the local Homeless Management Information System system.

Core Goal #4 **Coordinate outreach and access to services across the region**

To become a HUD High Performing Community, the Continuum of Care, the County, and all four cities in the County must develop a comprehensive outreach plan to help identify and connect people experiencing homelessness with appropriate housing and services resources. HUD standards articulate metrics for ensuring outreach covers the entire county, including regular training for outreach providers and that more unsheltered people gain access to housing services than the number of unsheltered people counted on the PIT count.

Finally, the Framework calls upon our collective efforts to work toward ensuring all jurisdictions within the County meet or exceed their Regional Housing Needs Allocation very low-income housing production goals over the 8-year period between (2023-2031).

Very-Low Income Housing Units to Produce



Strategies and Key Objectives

The Framework promotes aligned and coordinated efforts among housing crisis response system partners. Individual programs or initiatives may yield results with a specific subpopulation or group but making overall progress requires a systematic approach.

Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz County sets out four high-level strategic areas and numerous specific objectives to transform current efforts to address homelessness. The objectives listed below will span over multiple six-month action plan cycles between January 2024 and January 2027.

How Change Will Happen

1

Build a Coalition

Develop a strong and informed action-oriented partnership with leaders and key community partners.

2

Prevent Homelessness

Use targeted prevention and early intervention housing problem solving to help people and families keep or return to housing as quickly as possible.

3

Increase Connections

Expand and improve “front door” programs and services including outreach, temporary housing, and supportive services.

4

Increase Housing Affordability

Increase permanent housing and income growth resources and opportunities to become housed.

NOTE: The goals for this next three-year period are informed by feedback gathered from community forums held during the month of February 2024.

1 Build a Coalition

What We Are Doing

Expanding partnerships and provider capacity to support implementation of California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal services throughout the County.

Improving community outreach, education, and communications to increase public awareness and involvement in positive actions to address homelessness.

Developing and fostering more workforce and educational partnerships for people at-risk of or currently experiencing homelessness.

Establishing more standards of care and training resources for housing services efforts.

Increasing the involvement of people with lived experience of homelessness in our collective efforts through lived expertise action boards, mentoring opportunities, and other approaches.

Building cross-system collaboration networks to reduce entries into street homelessness from health care, criminal justice, and child welfare systems.



2 Prevent Homelessness

What We Are Doing

Expanding education and resource tools for renters on rights, responsibilities, and housing search.

Establishing a targeted homelessness prevention program based on effective practices from other communities.

Supporting family preservation and support programs and programs for foster youth.

Supporting “pre-release” planning from systems and institutions.

Engaging in “upstream interventions” to reduce adverse childhood experiences.

3 Increase Connections

What We Are Doing

Expanding and improving sheltering options and outcomes for specific subpopulations throughout the County.

Expanding and improving targeted street outreach and connection services to reduce disparities in access and outcomes.

Creating more regional service centers or hubs to engage with specific subpopulations at-risk of or currently experiencing homelessness.

Developing more centralized, accessible, and updated resource guide information for those seeking help.

3 Increase Connections

What We Are Doing (cont.)

Expanding low-barrier safe parking options throughout the County.

Creating innovative hotel voucher option programs for specific populations to get onto a path to permanent housing.

4 Increase Housing Affordability

What We Are Doing

Expanding housing subsidy resources for key populations.

Creating and expanding evidenced-based, targeted supported education and employment programs for people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.

Promoting alternative housing development and living situation options, e.g, ADUs, shared housing, small modular unit housing, etc.

Expanding and improving a centralized housing assistance fund to help with preventing and ending homelessness with one-time financial assistance.

Actively tracking and providing support for a countywide housing opportunity development pipeline.

Expanding and improving landlord outreach, education, and support for participation in housing partnership programs.



Acknowledgments

Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz County calls for the entire community to join in being part of the solution to homelessness.

Housing for Health Partnership Organizational Members *as of March 15, 2024

Abode Services
Association of Faith Communities
Beyond Elemental
Bill Wilson Center
Cabrillo College
CFSC, Inc.
Collins Consultancy
Community Action Board
Community Bridges: Enhanced Care Management Program
Crossover Sound Waves
Dept of Veterans Affairs
Encompass Community Services
Evolving Divine Journey
Equity Transit
Families in Transition
First 5 Santa Cruz County
The Free Guide
Front St Inc
Giving Grace Through Joy
GoldenPace Health
Homeless Garden Project
The HomeMore Project
Housing Authority of the County of Santa Cruz
Housing Choices
Housing Matters
Housing Santa Cruz County
Independent Living Services
Janus of Santa Cruz
Miracle Messages
Monarch Services
Nations Finest
Nonprofit Connection Santa Cruz County
Office of Congressman Jimmy Panetta
Raíces y Cariño
Santa Cruz Black
Santa Cruz Bread and Roses
Santa Cruz Cares

Santa Cruz Health Information Organization (SCHIO)
Senior Network Services
Siena House
United Veteran Council of Santa Cruz County
United Way of Santa Cruz County / 211 Santa Cruz County
VICTORY
Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center
Warming Center Program
Wings Homeless Advocacy

No single individual, organization, city, or County Department can do this alone. This strategic Framework is one that all stakeholders can use to align, coordinate, and collaborate to accomplish the shared goal of helping unhoused residents in Santa Cruz County secure housing. In a community with a severely limited affordable housing supply and homelessness at a crisis level, it is necessary to invest in and support practices that help the most people get and keep permanent housing. By involving those with histories of homelessness and housing instability in our efforts, setting measurable goals, working collaboratively across sectors on proven strategies, using data to assess progress, and continually improving and refining the work, Santa Cruz County can and will ensure all its residents have a healthy and safe place to call home.

The Housing for Health Partnership represents the federally-designated Santa Cruz County Continuum of Care, which is a local coalition of stakeholders working to create, support and coordinate a regional system to support people who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. Responsibilities of the Housing for Health Partnership include developing and coordinating a system of housing and service programs, developing a strategic plan, and implementing processes for applying for funding. Housing for Health Partnership Membership is free and open to any person or organization in Santa Cruz County that is committed to making an impact in our ongoing and collaborative effort to ensure all residents have a stable, safe and healthy place to live.

Join now:

