

RETURNING TO WHAT WORKS: HOMELESSNESS EXECUTIVE ORDER ANALYSIS

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KEY POINTS

- Homelessness has increased every year for the last 8 years.
- States have been hamstrung into pouring money into failing services due to poor federal policy.
- The President's Executive Order would place more power in the hands of the states to address their homelessness populations.

ISSUE

The "Housing First" approach promised to end homelessness in 10 years, but since its implementation, the nation has only seen an increase in this population of vulnerable Americans ([Wu, 2025](#)). Nationally homeless population trends have reached record highs, and in Texas homeless populations have increased every year for the last 8 years ([HUD, n.d.-a](#)). Housing First, the Federal homelessness initiative, was originally aimed at providing a secure living space for a homeless person so that he or she could then pursue treatment, therapy, or job training. But in 2013, the Obama administration shifted emphasis away from housing *first* toward a policy of housing *only*. Instead of having taxpayer dollars fund services that require homeless individuals to actively participate in programs that lead to self-sufficiency in exchange for housing, money was diverted to mere rapid rehousing. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development ([HUD, n.d.-b](#)), rapid rehousing programs provide rental assistance for short term (meaning up to three months) and for medium term (four to 24 months) "without first requiring household members to meet behavioral prerequisites like sobriety and treatment adherence." This emphasis on low to no barriers to participation in a rapid rehousing program created an environment with no accountability for either the homeless service provider or the individual seeking services. For example, in Fiscal Year 2024, Texas was awarded grants totaling over \$197 million to acquire

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housing space as well as subsidizing rent—only to have many participants return to homelessness once the subsidies run out ([HUD, n.d.-c](#)). According to VOCAL-Texas, an Austin based homeless outreach organization, 28% of individuals who receive a subsidy for rapid rehousing returned to homelessness in 2023 ([VOCAL-TX, n.d.](#)).

Even if cities or elected officials wanted to strengthen requirements, their hands were tied by the strings that came attached to federal funding. Homeless service providers could only *offer* programs like drug treatment or therapy but not mandate it, because *requiring* participation in these programs is not part of Housing First's core principles, of "housing without any preconditions or barriers and offering voluntary supportive services" and complying with the approach is critical for receiving federal funds ([HUD, 2023](#)). This left cities with the unfortunate choice either to rely upon the philanthropy of its citizens or to continue with Housing First compliance.

EXECUTIVE ORDER ENDING CRIME AND DISORDER IN AMERICA'S STREETS

The policies that constitute the Housing First approach are primarily dictated at the Federal administrative level, meaning that a simple executive order (EO) would be sufficient to change them. Such an EO was issued by President Trump on July 24, 2025. The EO, titled "Ending Crime and Disorder on America's Streets," reverses many of the policies implemented that have only exacerbated the problem of homelessness. The order has five sections outlining the administration's new approach ([The White House, 2025](#)):

1. "Purpose and Policy" outlines the magnitude of the homeless issue and explains that the Trump Administration's approach will emphasize treatment and public order.
2. "Restoring Civil Commitment" provides assistance to state and local governments for the implementation of "maximally flexible civil commitment" in order to guide individuals to the

treatment they need based on their level of danger to themselves or others.

3. "Fighting Vagrancy on America's Streets" requires an assessment of the grants that states and municipalities receive based on whether they enforce prohibitions on open illicit drug use, urban camping, and loitering, and whether they adopt standards that appropriately address individuals who are a danger to themselves or others.
4. "Redirecting Federal Resources Toward Effective Methods of Addressing Homelessness" ensures that discretionary grants that are issued for substance abuse and mental health services fund "evidence-based programs and do not fund programs that fail to achieve adequate outcomes."
5. "Increasing Accountability and Safety in America's Homelessness Programs" can be achieved by ending support for housing first policies that deprioritize the personal accountability of the homeless person seeking services often by failing to promote treatment, recovery and self-sufficiency. It is also critical to hold those service providers who receive grants to a higher standard of effectiveness, which can be done through broadening the grant applicant pool and thereby increasing competition. Programs that are ineffective at increasing public safety and reducing homelessness will lose out on grants to those that are more effective at reaching these goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the recent Executive Order, Texas can take these recommended steps to address homelessness in a meaningful way.

Interim Charge

During the interim, the Texas Legislature should investigate the policy options regarding homelessness made available by the new Executive Order.

For instance, the Legislature can research how best to organize the Continuum of Care (CoC) program. This program is the primary means by which non-profits and local governments work together to provide homeless services but lacks uniformity in data reporting and sharing ([HUD, n.d.-c](#)). They have little oversight when it comes to their overall operation and are left largely to govern themselves. Creating one CoC for the state instead of having 12 will allow for better state oversight.

Homeless Services Audits

Homeless service providers should be judged by the self-sufficiency metrics laid out in SB 399 ([2025](#)) from the 89th regular legislative session which required a biennial audit of the effectiveness and efficiency of homeless services. Resources should be allocated based on which service providers and models are more successful in the self-sufficiency metrics.

Hold Cities Accountable

Cities need to be held accountable for non-enforcement of their public nuisance bans, which includes the ban on public camping. Similar to SB 241 ([2025](#)) from the 89th regular legislative session, cities can have funds withheld if they are found not to be complying with the state's ban on public camping.

Create Crisis Service Centers

The service center can be created using the framework, created by SB 2487 ([2025](#)) of the 89th regular legislative session, to establish a centralized homeless service center in large counties, and create a procedure to direct homeless individuals to the appropriate services based upon evaluation by mental health professionals.

Implement Data Sharing

As of now there is no requirement to share data about available shelter beds in real time to aid in finding spaces for unsheltered homeless. Since clearing a homeless camp or removing an individual from a public space requires a bed to put them real time data sharing is not only a good idea it is necessary. Data regarding available services and resources should be collected and maintained for the purpose of sharing in real time—similar to SB 2488 ([2025](#)) of the 89th regular legislative session—so that law enforcement, first responders, and street outreach teams can collaborate with service providers to more effectively connect homeless individuals with the help they need.

CONCLUSION

While Housing First claims to be evidence-based, the evidence has shown how ineffective the policies which constitute it truly are. In order to appropriately address the issue of homelessness, an effective and lasting policy must address its primary underlying causes: namely, mental health and drug addiction. Providing housing only without requiring commitment to reaching self-sufficiency has led to an increasing number of homeless individuals year after year. With President Trump's new Executive Order, Texas has an opportunity to make real progress in helping this most vulnerable segment of our population. ■

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