

Business Impact on Anti-Poverty & Homelessness Summit

BizFed Institute's Key Takeaways

April 8, 2022



WATCH THE RECORDED FORUM ONLINE

Part 1: https://youtu.be/3Q_-XI0x5MU

Part 2: <https://youtu.be/-WjrsD0fX08>

I want to thank the sponsors, speakers, staffers, partners, and attendees who made our long-awaited Anti-Poverty & Homelessness Summit at USC Hotel a resounding success. I can't think of a more urgent time or topic to mark our return to in-person programming. Amid a backdrop of exploding street encampments – and driven by data from major surveys and polls – every Los Angeles mayoral candidate has named homelessness their top issue. But how exactly do you go about solving an issue many see as “intractable” and “systemic”? That's not a rhetorical question. We have an answer and we've set it into motion by convening this summit. I believe we can solve the crisis on our streets by **tackling root causes together**, with a special focus on eradicating poverty, fixing structural inefficiencies, and better understanding every unhoused Angeleno's unique story.

Thank you for dedicating your time and attention to LA's #1 issue,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Kevin Harbour'.

Kevin Harbour
BizFed Institute President

FLASH POLL RESULTS



BizFed Institute Program Chairs **Matt Klink** and **Ruth Drizen-Dohs** opened the summit by delivering eye-opening – but largely unsurprising – insights from our **Homelessness Flash Poll**. 130 respondents representing a variety of industries and perspectives weighed in during the lead-up to the summit. 83% of respondents ranked homelessness among society’s most critical issues today, while 65% said homelessness and poverty in Los Angeles County are “out of control.”

A dismal 2% reported witnessing improvement. Only 3% said “there are plans in place” to address the issue. Top issues identified by respondents as “root causes” of homelessness include lack of adequate mental health services and treatment for drug addiction, medical issues, rising housing costs, and systemic poverty. Concern among respondents appears to outweigh willingness to take action. 43% would donate to charitable groups and 36% would seek additional education on root causes, but less than one-third of respondents are willing to take on community leadership roles, lobby for change, pay higher taxes, contribute to campaigns, or get involved in advocacy work to address homelessness.

“While there is some consensus on what causes homelessness, there is no consensus on how to solve it,” Klink said.

KEYNOTE #1



Co-keynote speaker **Kerry Morrison**, founder and project director for **Heart Forward LA**, challenged attendees to envision a society that treats unhoused individuals struggling with mental health challenges like *people*, with life stories and aspirations, rather than societal outcasts branded by a diagnosis. That society exists. Morrison spent two years in Trieste, Italy as a recipient of The Durfee Foundation’s Stanton Fellowship and was awestruck by how the

city's approach to mental health care differed from what she had seen on the streets and in the heavily guarded clinics of Hollywood.

Trieste (population 230,000; approximately the size of the city of San Bernardino) is the best place on earth to live if you are diagnosed with a mental health condition, according to the World Health Organization. The port city in northeastern Italy has successfully integrated people with mental health conditions into community life – as “full citizens,” Morrison emphasized – instead of shutting them away in institutions.

Here's how it works...

- Trieste is divided into four quadrants, each with its own “mental health center” (not clinic).
- The city has 6 psych ward beds. Each quadrant has six additional emergency beds. That's one bed per 7,666 people citywide.
- Their mental health centers do not use restraints or place patients in solitary confinement.
- Specialized teams of community psychiatrists, people with lived experience, and de-escalation experts respond to mental health crisis calls, rather than law enforcement.

It's not the infrastructure that drives the success of this system, declared a “global best practice” by the WHO; it's the city's commitment to “radical hospitality” and human kindness, Morrison said. Is a similar model possible in a city the size of LA? Regardless of scalability and cost concerns, Morrison believes deregulation and renewed focus on human dignity will move the needle toward enduring change. This shift toward embracing compassion is essential. She held up a rubber band ball to illustrate how she laid out her Stanton Fellowship inquiry. Her goal was to reveal the person at the center of the ball obscured by rules, regulations, structures, and other impediments represented by the rubber bands. We have “piled all of this onto our ability to take care of people with mental illness” in our country, she said. She reached into her bag of props and pulled out a handful of loose rubber bands. These are the restrictions they avoid in Trieste, she said, pulling out an orange ball. It's “the person first.”

KEYNOTE #2



Co-keynote speaker **Elizabeth Eastlund**, executive director of **Rainbow Services**, opened her address by shining a light on the intersection of homelessness and domestic violence with powerful figures. 80% of mothers and children experiencing homelessness previously experienced domestic violence. People who are homeless are four times as likely to experience domestic violence. In 2020, 39% of adults experiencing homelessness in LA had previously experienced domestic violence. Neither issue can be solved without addressing the other, Eastlund said.

Solutions to both hinge on production of more affordable housing. Beyond emergency shelter and transitional housing, Eastlund's organization often can't find places for people to go. (Rainbow Services serves the South Bay/Harbor area of L.A. County and partners with agencies throughout Southern California to ensure the safety of

anyone fleeing domestic violence.) 95% of survivors served by Rainbow Services live in poverty and are at risk of homelessness due to ongoing violence in their homes. With little or no income, they have few options for safe, stable housing if they flee their abusers.

Bureaucratic hurdles and data collection rules further complicate matters. The federal government’s definition of homelessness includes people fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence situations. However, local Homelessness Management Information Systems (HMIS) bar organizations such as Rainbow from uploading “identifying information” about domestic violence survivors. That means HMIS captures little to no county-level data about domestic violence survivors who are experiencing homelessness and housing instability. This data is crucial to securing funding for support services. Local systems and regulations have created an invisible population, Eastlund said.

More robust data, funding, and affordable housing alone won’t solve the problem. Rainbow is also advocating for “trauma-informed care” that rebuilds a sense of control, empowerment, and hope among survivors. Amplifying the voices of people with lived experience is central to their mission and the work of the Domestic Violence and Homeless Services Coalition (DVHSC).

LaRae Cantley, a DVHSC advocate and self-described “edu-tainer,” joined Eastlund at the podium and urged attendees to view homelessness as a “relational problem” fueled by oppressive, exclusionary systems. Consider intake forms, resumes, and decisions about who gets invited into rooms and included in conversations. She told her own survivor’s story about visiting a facility with armed guards and bulletproof glass. LaRae said she rose to the challenge of opening up about her private trauma, just to receive a piece of paper telling her to wait six months for services. What would this system look like if we put people first – and recognized that they are often the most qualified experts in making sense of their own stories and needs? In her line of advocacy work, LaRae doesn’t ask, “What’s wrong with you?” She asks survivors, “What matters to you?”

PANEL #1: Attacking Root Causes of Homelessness



Moderator **Frank Zerunyan**, Professor of the Practice of Governance at USC Price, kicked off his panel by applauding keynote speakers for highlighting the “human factor” of homelessness; he zeroed in on the “home” factor. Housing shortage itself is not the cause of the human tragedy on our streets, he said, but dramatically increasing and accelerating production is no doubt a key part of the solution. Zerunyan challenged his four panelists to identify the other “externalities” that must be addressed.



Panelist **Ricky Bluthenthal, Ph.D.**, Associate Dean for Social Justice at USC Keck School of Medicine, spotlighted structural inequities and inefficiency. He leaned on his research and background in drug use epidemiology to myth-bust the narrative that drug use is fueling the recent rise in LA’s unhoused population. What *has* contributed to the explosion of encampments, he said, is a shift in underlying market factors and a decades-long pattern of disinvestment in housing production nationwide. People who are less economically viable because of mental health issues or substance abuse are less competitive in this hot housing market. Structural racism and discriminatory practices also keep people from breaking the cycle of poverty, Bluthenthal noted.

Panelist **Janey Rountree**, executive director of the California Policy Lab at UCLA, called for data-driven diagnoses supported by rigorous quantitative research. The Lab, which began as a pilot program in 2017, hosts data from more than 140 data-sharing agreements with local and state agencies. These figures show “everyone experiencing homelessness does not have a serious mental health illness,” Rountree said. The county should be broken down into several geographic areas with specific goals for each area’s homeless population, she said. Resources should be pumped into meeting performance metrics that are measured quarterly. Rountree emphasized the need for a better overall understanding of the county’s homeless population, safety net programs that are easier for people to enroll in, and civically engaged voters who pay attention to state bills. She urged the business community to pay special attention to proposed laws that complicate the way nonprofits are funded, and regulations that make it harder to build housing because of well-intended environmental concerns. “You have an important role to play at the policy level,” she reminded attendees.

Panelist **AJ Galka-Gonyeau**, director of permanent supportive housing and residential services at National Community Renaissance, echoed Rountree’s call for solutions informed by data. Why don’t we have experts study the population and allocate housing accordingly? We can’t just focus on setting up detox centers, building shelters, and handing out temporary housing vouchers. People won’t have a place to exit to if we’re not developing permanent housing. She also spoke at length about the regulatory hurdles that Kerry Morrison discussed in her keynote address. Galka-Gonyeau recalled unsuccessful efforts to help an unhoused woman in Santa Monica. Despite extensive documentation of her need for mental health treatment – and the collaboration of case management teams, social workers, law enforcement, and other organizations – local rules and regulations “halted so much progress” and prevented them from taking steps to compel treatment.

Panelist **Suzanne Holley**, president and CEO of the Downtown Center Business Improvement District, hit a nerve with fellow business leaders. Several attendees in the room nodded as she recalled her experience bridging the business and social services spheres. “It’s like they were speaking a language I didn’t speak. They used 27 different acronyms!” she said. Business leaders recognize homelessness as the region’s top problem and want to be part of the solution, Holley said. Why are they running into roadblocks at every turn? She was discouraged and frustrated when she learned firsthand how difficult it was to secure county services for an unhoused individual in her district. “If you have this organization and these teams and resources, and we can’t get one person the help they need, what chance do we have for everyone else?” Holley asked. Coordinating with county agencies to make better use of existing resources is one of the top goals of this summit.

PANEL #2: Best Practices for Anti-Poverty



Moderator **Tracy Hernandez**, founding CEO of BizFed, inspired the speakers on her panel to discuss the value of learning from both success and “crash-and-burn” failure. Mistakes should be studied, not feared, while success can always be further built upon. Hernandez and her panelists (who all shared stories about real people they were able to get back on track) focused on themes that drove narratives forward throughout the summit: the power of unlikely partnerships, investments in humanity, and creative innovation such as converting vacant retail sites into housing or using empty hotel rooms as temporary shelter. We’re here to “challenge the norm and spur active solutions,” Hernandez reminded the room.



Panelist **Gary Dean Painter**, director of the Sol Price Center for Social Innovation, called for *rapid* learning about available safety nets, who they’re supporting, and which populations still have no adequate services to fall back on. Black Angelenos are vastly overrepresented in the unhoused population. We need rapid, widespread, data-driven intelligence about why. The business community should also refocus its attention on combatting inequities in hiring, Painter said. He applauded the early successes of local businesses that have found mutually beneficial ways to hire people with unstable job histories, instead of letting traditional administrative processes immediately filter out their applications.

Panelist **Frank Girardot**, senior director of communications for BYD North America, drew applause with his story about Danny Villanueva. The tattoo-covered former gang member did six stints in prison before asking BYD for a fresh start. He’s now in a co-managerial position. “We know it can be done. Success stories like his play out on the floor of our factory all the time,” Girardot said. His company has made tangible investments in humanity by giving preference to people who face traditional barriers to employment, like Villanueva. It starts by asking nontraditional hires, “What’s your story?” Moving forward, Girardot wants to see more companies, organizations, and elected

officials engaging the federal government and securing additional resources for the community by sharing these local success stories.

Panelist **Clint Carlton**, director of innovation at the Dream Center, took a chance on a guy from Skid Row eight years ago. Jacob Hurley was in and out of prison, addicted to heroin, living on the streets, and shunned by his family. Thanks to Dream Center services and partnerships, Hurley turned his life around, held down steady employment, and was ultimately promoted to food services director at the Dream Center. He helped the organization's food bank feed 5.5 million people during the coronavirus pandemic. "These people do have a shot at life," Carlton said. He urged nonprofits, businesses, elected officials, and community members to work together, especially at on-the-ground initiatives that can produce immediate results. He invited attendees to join Dream Center staffers for foster care intervention work at 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. on weekdays. They "become the case workers," he said, building bunkbeds, cleaning homes, and closing cases to help families in danger of losing their children because of poverty.

Panelist **Lt. Geoffrey Deedrick**, representing the Sheriff's Homeless Outreach Services Team (HOST), brought at least one attendee to tears with his remarks. He shared the tale of Jason Schneidman, a one-time drug addict living on the streets of Venice who found his way and became a celebrity barber. Schneidman's first client is now six months into rehab. Deedrick embodies the humanity-validating authenticity he's calling all deputies to embrace in the fight against homelessness. Law enforcement officers who show compassion are not weak; allowing fellow humans to degrade on the street is a sign of weak links in the community. **"Screw the rules and expectations," Deedrick told the room. "If it's legal, moral, ethical, and it feels right, do it."** The foundational model for HOST was created when the county evacuated approximately 1,000 unhoused individuals from the region's five main riverbeds during El Niño preparations. Deputies managed to do it without any arrests or uses of force. To date, HOST has never made an arrest or reported any uses of force. Every deputy on the specialized team is highly trained in crisis response and stabilization techniques. Deedrick handpicks all of them for their maturity, experience, strength, courage, and compassion. Like Girardot, he begins each case with engagement. He asks unhoused Angelenos who they are, where they came from, and where their families are. Almost all of them have – or had – aspirations. Deedrick cited a study that found 30% of unhoused individuals have bachelor's degrees. More than 4,000 deputies have now been trained to implement the HOST model of compassion, dignity, and rapport-building. Failure, in Deedrick's eyes, is that more people aren't aware of – and making moves to replicate – HOST's successes.

Panelist **Mark Loranger**, CEO of Chrysalis, echoed Deedrick's call to screw the rules and Morrison's plea to peel back band after band of constricting regulations. "Cut out the BS," he said. "Why do we make people jump through so many hoops? Don't just blame government and systems. I think all of us make our structures way too complicated, especially with administrative processes." The solution is to prioritize human-centered design that removes systemic barriers to employment. The #1 reason that people first become unhoused is because of job loss or other economic disruption, Loranger reminded the group. Co-occurring challenges such as mental health issues or substance abuse make it even harder for people to get back on their chosen pathways. Business leaders have the power to place people in permanent jobs, gifting them with dignity and time to learn basic survival skills. Chrysalis has four owned-and-operated businesses that employs more than 600 people. Loranger also cited the Los Angeles Regional Initiative for Social Enterprise (LA:RISE) as model of success. The collaborative partnership unites LA's Workforce Development System with nonprofit social enterprises and private employers. LA:RISE has helped more than 2,000 people with high barriers to employment find jobs and stay employed.

SPECIAL PRESENTATION: “United to House LA”

ELI LIPMEN & ALAN GREENLEE

"United to House LA" Ballot Measure

Special Presentation

This Measure Will:

Help People Experiencing Homelessness or at Risk of Becoming Homeless

The "working poor": <15% AMI (\$17,750 for a family of 4) and <30% AMI (\$35,450 for a family of 4)

Generates \$875 million annually

*through a one-time tax assessed at the point of sale of high value properties (4% for \$5-\$10m sales; 5.5% for \$10m+ sales)

Affects only 3% of property sales

*based on March 2019-March 2020 property sales, 97% of property sales would not have been subjected to this one-time tax

Median single Family/home sale price ~\$500k

All real estate transactions > \$30,000
March 2019-March 2020
(n = 33,762)

Transfer tax begins at \$5 million

97%

OF PROPERTY SALES ARE UNAFFECTED

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MoveLA's **Eli Lipmen** and Southern California Association of Non-Profit Housing's **Alan Greenlee** delivered an extended BizFed Super Bowl commercial about the citizen-led "United to House LA" measure. It would generate \$8 billion over 10 years, the largest long-term housing funding ever considered in the city of LA.

If passed in November 2022, this ballot initiative would provide consistent funding to build affordable housing *and* support organizations with renter stability programs that keep families in their homes. It would impose a two-tier assessment on the sale of properties exceeding \$5 million. 3% of local property sales between March 2019 and March 2020 would have been subjected to this one-time fee. Approximately \$875 million would be generated annually. The measure's core tenets involve protecting existing affordable housing, creating new affordable housing, and supporting services for low-income renters.

“We didn’t let politicians touch this measure,” said Lipmen. “We’re not actively seeking their endorsement. We crafted this with housing and homeless experts, and ensured it was truly citizen-driven.”

SUCCESS STORY: “The Way Home” in Houston

The collage features a green header with the text "LANCE GILLIAM" and "Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County". Below this is a large, stylized "Special Presentation" in cursive. The central part of the collage is a screenshot of a Sunday Los Angeles Times article titled "The homelessness quandary" by Marshall Ingwerson. The article discusses the challenges of homelessness in Los Angeles and mentions that Houston has cut homelessness by more than half. To the right of the article is a photo of Lance Gilliam speaking at a podium with a USC Price logo. The bottom of the collage has a green bar with the website "bizfedinstitute.org" and social media handles "@bizfedinstitute", "priceschool.usc.edu", and "@uscprice".

Lance Gilliam, chair of the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County’s board of directors, treated attendees to a special presentation about the country’s most remarkable street clean-up success story. Houston leads the nation in reducing homelessness. In 2011, Greater Houston had approximately 8,500 unhoused individuals; this year, they counted fewer than 3,500. That’s a 64% drop since 2011 and a 19% drop since 2020. The data is imprecise but provides telling benchmarks, Gilliam said, launching into an itemized breakdown of what Houston did right. Can a county the size of Los Angeles – with its many jurisdictional challenges – adopt and perhaps adapt practices that worked in Houston?

We encourage you to read the *Los Angeles Times* op-ed by Marshall Ingwerson (attached to this recap) that Gilliam referenced during his presentation. It calls out three things that Houston leaned on to hold its ground against homelessness, despite having a harder battle than LA on many fronts: **scale of effort**, **excellent organization**, and **pragmatism**. Gilliam identified three additional strengths that supercharged the Coalition’s guiding goal to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring: **good governance**, **streamlined structure**, and **collaboration toward achieving a single outcome**.

2012 marked a turning point in Houston’s fight against homelessness. A collaborative effort called “**The Way Home**” was established to prevent and end homelessness in Houston, Pasadena, Harris County, Fort Bend County, and Montgomery County. The Coalition, whose board is chaired by Gilliam, serves as lead agency of The Way Home. Today, more than 100 partners collaborate under their umbrella. They include homeless service agencies, local governments, public housing authorities, the local Veterans Affairs office, other nonprofits, and various community stakeholders.

The Way Home’s successful approach is dubbed “housing first”; in reality, it focuses on providing both permanent housing *and* supportive services. This combined focus is the equation for life stability, Gilliam said. Their real-time, web-based system has a methodical process of triaging, assessing, assigning, and tracking accountability. They split their efforts almost evenly between short-term intervention, medium-term intervention, and long-term intervention. Sound good on paper? It’s translating to unparalleled success on the streets. Houston is one of the first cities in the country to effectively end veteran homelessness. The region’s encampment response strategy (funded

by COVID dollars) has been named by the federal government as a national best practice because they aim to rehouse – rather than merely displace – the unhoused.

“We don’t engage encampments until we have somewhere for them to go,” said Gilliam.

It wasn’t always smooth sailing in Houston. Gilliam shared a graphic illustrating the flow of financing and homeless services prior to 2010. Coalition staffers call it the “pick-up sticks graphic” because of its mess of spaghetti-like lines. Each of these administrative processes or bureaucratic barriers represent an additional hurdle to services for clients. Houston managed to pick up those sticks – or peel back the rubber bands – and reimagine its system with shared goals, trusted data, and coordinated action. Funds were applied swiftly when the city and county invested \$65 million in the Community COVID Housing Program with the goal of housing 5,000 people by October 2022. As of Feb. 21, 2022, more than 7,700 people have been housed through the program.

Bravo, Houston. Thank you for leading – and sharing – the way home, Lance Gilliam.

CLOSING REMARKS: Supervisor Solis Honors BizFed Institute



Hon. Hilda Solis, chair of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, commended BizFed Institute and USC Price for recognizing the fundamental link between homelessness and poverty, and how both are driven by systemic inequities exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. As many as 120,000 households with 184,000 children in LA could experience homelessness because of this pandemic alone, according to a UCLA report cited by Solis.

She offered her congratulations to Houston after listening to Gilliam’s presentation and acknowledged that LA is “nowhere near where Houston is.” It remains the nation’s epicenter of homelessness, with more than 66,000 people on the streets of LA city each night.

“We will work with the city to address homelessness. County officials will do that,” Solis said.

She vowed to empower entities that need help with both funding and coordination. A “new, reformed governance model” will be unveiled in the coming weeks to ensure boots on the ground get the aid they need to serve more unhoused individuals, she added. Solis rallied the private sector to get involved in the effort, reminding business leaders that county agencies “can’t do it alone.”



Los Angeles Times

Op-Ed: What can Houston teach Los Angeles about solving homelessness?

BY MARSHALL INGWERSON

JAN. 30, 2022

The struggle to solve homelessness is getting harder nearly everywhere. Yet recent years have still seen many more victories than defeats. And the biggest victory is in greater Houston, which over the last decade has cut homelessness [by more than half](#).

Houston's story holds lessons for Los Angeles. The chief one is that solving homelessness is less about economics than about strategic clarity and execution.

Evidence that homelessness is *not* an inescapable fact of modern post-industrial life is not hard to find. From the time systematic counting began in 2007 to the last official count in 2020, the homeless population fell nationwide by 10.3%.

The decline has been especially significant among homeless families with children, which is particularly good news.

If that good news seems too removed from the particular woes of West Coast mega-cities, note that while homelessness in Los Angeles County was doubling over the last decade, it was significantly dropping in Long Beach — in the same crazed Southern California housing market and same unequal local economy. It's also fallen in [Pasadena](#) and [Glendale](#), the two other cities that handle homelessness separately from the rest of the county.

L.A. and Houston are the second- and fourth-largest cities in the country, two vast, highly diverse Sun Belt sprawls. Houston has slightly higher poverty levels, while L.A.'s unemployment rate fell close to Houston's leading into the pandemic.

One significant difference: Rents in Los Angeles are much higher than in Houston. This gave L.A. a much bigger homelessness problem even when it was half its current scale.

In many ways, Houston has the harder battle.

Among 15 metropolitan areas tracked by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Greater Los Angeles had the [highest wage growth in the nation](#) in the 12 months that ended in September. Houston ranked near the bottom.

Houston has [fewer affordable housing units](#) per extremely low-income families than any U.S. city but Las Vegas. Los Angeles is only slightly better.

Over much of the past decade, Houston's [Harris County had the highest eviction rate](#) in the nation after New York City.

Yet Houston continues to hold its ground against homelessness. Here's how the city has done it:

Scale of effort. Houston provides many times more affordable permanent housing units — much of it including supportive health and social services — than its headcount of the homeless population on any given night, according to Houston's Coalition for the Homeless. Permanent housing has been its whole focus. Temporary shelter is left entirely to churches and other nonprofits.

To approach Houston's effort — and offer enough permanent housing to cut its nightly homeless population by half — L.A. would have to multiply its efforts by more than fivefold to provide at least 150,000 total units, according to my analysis of recent housing data.

Excellent organization. Greater Houston's single lead homeless agency [orchestrates its services supremely well](#). Its efforts include integrating front-line health and housing services workers, training them to understand each other's jargon and pioneering a shared database for tracking all official interactions with people experiencing homelessness, their needs and their use of services.

Pragmatism. Houston appears not to have let compassion for the homeless warp into a respect for homelessness itself. The focus has been on making homelessness ["rare, brief and](#)

[nonrecurring,”](#) and not necessarily a more comfortable option. Houston has [decommissioned eight homeless encampments](#) in the last year, offering residents a path into permanent housing. Between [85% and 90% of homeless people](#) take up that offer. Those who don't still have to move on from the encampments.

Houston's approach can be summed up as *strategic clarity*.

Those who work on solving homelessness in Los Angeles understand this. The [architect of the Houston system](#) was even brought in to [consult on organizing the L.A. system](#).

But what makes this so hard for Los Angeles?

Strangely, it's not the cost of real estate that gets in the way of building more housing. Studies put land costs at only about one-eighth of the total cost of building supportive, affordable housing in L.A.

It's not the mashup of jurisdictions involved. Houston's homelessness agency straddles three counties and many municipalities — not to mention the tensions of operating a city that [leans politically blue](#) in a ragingly red state. Los Angeles looks almost seamless by comparison.

It's not race that differentiates. Black people are highly [overrepresented among the homeless](#) everywhere. Houston has a much higher Black population than Los Angeles but much lower homelessness.

Here's what makes progress hard in Los Angeles:

No one's in charge. Individual leaders buzz with impatience for action; saintlike individuals produce quiet acts of compassionate heroism — but the systems exude a muddy lack of urgency. No government or agency has the authority or mandate to assert leadership, set priorities and take decisive action in dealing with homelessness. Unlike Houston, Los Angeles has a weak-mayor system, no top-elected official in the county and no executive position with a comparable agenda-setting power. The many local bureaucracies involved are a confused tangle of mismatched authorities, responsibilities and resources.

Los Angeles doesn't know what it wants. Housing growth has been deliberately slowed by 40 years of zoning restrictions, says Jason Ward, an economist at the Rand Corp. That can make sense in a place that ships its water in from a different climate zone, is strangled with traffic, surrounded by wildfire risk and sits astride a major earthquake fault. It also serves voters who want to protect their own property values. All these legitimate concerns — regulated with maddening inefficiency — serve as a roadblock to affordable housing. Even

the labor protections baked into [Proposition HHH's \\$1.2 billion](#) to fund homeless housing, according to a recent Rand study, may ultimately cost Los Angeles [800 additional housing units](#).

L.A.'s compassion is conflicted. It vacillates between wanting to end homelessness and making homelessness more comfortable. In reviewing the academic literature on the economics of homelessness, Columbia University professor Brendan O'Flaherty concluded that many of the measures projected for Los Angeles under Proposition HHH “are designed not to reduce street homelessness, but to create a large but well-groomed and well-mannered street population: dedicated parking lots, storage facilities for possessions, portable toilets, and drop-in and hygiene centers.”

Every step that makes street homelessness a little less uncomfortable has the unintended consequence of drawing more people into the streets. The clearest evidence of this was the aftermath of a 2012 court ruling that [forbade the city of Los Angeles from seizing property on skid row](#) without a specific legal reason. Because the ruling applied only to the city, in the two years straddling the ruling unsheltered homelessness rose within city limits at 10 times the rate of the rest of L.A. County.

While the court ruling showed a reasonable respect for people with very little stuff and nowhere to put it, it also showed the huge elasticity of street homelessness.

Those trying to solve homelessness in Los Angeles are seen as capable and committed. Likewise, surveys show Angelenos are concerned about the impact of homelessness on neighborhood quality of life as well as the hardships homeless people endure. Holding those two legitimate concerns simultaneously is strikingly mature and healthy.

But strategic clarity and crisp execution have been painfully slow in coming. About a [thousand of the 10,000 affordable units](#) promised by Proposition HHH, passed in 2016, have been opened — at astronomical costs.

The takeaway from Houston is that L.A.'s problem is, at its root, an organizational problem, and there's opportunity in that. If Los Angeles could to a significant degree achieve clarity of purpose around homelessness, fully empower an agency to own it — and align the rest of the bureaucracies to work together — that approach could serve as a template for how L.A. can organize itself more effectively and inclusively as a high-functioning community.

Meanwhile, real progress in affordable housing will probably take place in tens of thousands of backyards and former garages as restrictions fall away for accessory dwelling units and single-family zoning ends.

Many people now living on the streets still won't fit in that world. To house them, and to reclaim the public spaces they inhabit, Los Angeles will need to decide what it really wants for these struggling people, then organize itself to achieve it on a much greater scale.

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