

Mental Health and Homelessness Policy Roadmap

Summary

On any given night in California over 150,000 people experience homelessness. Almost two thirds are unsheltered. We are not moving fast enough and we have to do better. My goal is to cut unsheltered homelessness in half in three years.

Strategy

- 1) *Provide more tools to help those who are severely mentally ill*
- 2) *Quickly scale up more interim supportive housing*
- 3) *Invest in more permanent supportive housing*
- 4) *Encourage coordination and expedite processing*

Mental Health

Estimates show that 25-40% of our homeless population has a severe mental illness. After much effort over the last two years, we have added major tools to help those who have a severe mental illness.

- **CARE Court** - connects a person struggling with untreated mental illness – and often also substance use challenges – with a court-ordered Care Plan for up to 24 months to help people with mental health needs and substance use disorders exit homelessness. This took effect January 1, 2024 but many counties are taking two years to implement.
- **Expanding the definition of “gravely disabled”** The legislature unanimously passed SB 43 in 2023. This bill finally expanded the definition of “gravely disabled” for purposes of either placing a person on an involuntary psychiatric hold or conservatorship to help increase essential mental health care to those in need. This has been a decades long struggle after we over-corrected in the 1970s.
- **More “behavioral health” housing** - The legislature voted to amend the Health Services Act to have 25% of the money from the “Millionaire’s Tax” (1% tax on incomes over one million) go to behavioral health housing, and also allowed voters to decide whether or not to authorize \$6.38 billion in general obligation bonds in the March 2024 primary election to finance behavioral health treatment for individuals experiencing homelessness, veterans with substance use disorders, and others. The voters approved the bond, which will help build an estimated 11,150 behavioral health housing beds to ensure proper mental health and substance use disorder treatment for homeless people.

The above programs are steps to provide wrap-around care to mentally ill individuals. California must monitor and evaluate the above programs for their progress.

Unsheltered Homelessness and a Lack of Housing Supply

To end unsheltered homelessness, California must develop more pathways to permanent housing, increase Section 8 voucher uptake, and continue to invest in housing development at scale.

- Lower shelter costs and increase transition pathways to permanent housing. I introduced legislation (SB 634) to ease the development of ‘Opportunity Housing’, an innovative, proven model that radically reduces the cost of providing high-quality, non-congregate housing and shelter services to homeless Californians. I reintroduced legislation (SB 1395) in 2024 aimed at a similar goal.
- Better utilize federal housing vouchers. California ‘wastes’ an estimated 40,000 federal housing vouchers every year. These Section 8 voucher holders often cannot pay application fees and meet security deposit requirements, which acts as a de facto disqualification from applying for an apartment and using a voucher. That’s why I am proud to coauthor AB 653 (Reyes), which aims to overhaul California’s Section 8 program, improve the uptake of Section 8 vouchers, and provide support to regional voucher administrators to improve their uptake rates.
- Encourage Coordination and Expedite Processing. Currently, California’s multiple housing agencies collaborate with other state agencies to form the Interagency Council on Homeless, Housing and Transportation Workgroup, and Adaptation Planning Guide, but are in need of strengthened coordination and expedited processing. We must also expedite construction approvals for housing projects and consolidate all state housing funding programs into a streamlined application. I supported AB 519 (Schiavo), which will develop recommendations on implementing a consolidated housing application by July 1, 2026.
- Increase permanent affordable housing. Santa Clara County’s Measure A (2016) led to over 5,000 new and renovated units, and we need continued investment from the state to build on this progress. I am proud to coauthor AB 1657 (Wicks), which would put a \$10 billion affordable housing bond on the ballot to generate more affordable housing in the Bay Area.

Conclusion

Continued focus on our mental health and homelessness programs is essential to addressing this crisis. My office will continue to evaluate our progress and push for innovative solutions to meet the moment.