

# CREATING A TIPPING POINT FOR ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES

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*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: YEAR ONE OF 100&CHANGE*

# Introduction

**Imagine the future with us.** Cities and counties of all kinds — big and small, urban and rural, red and blue — have made homelessness rare and brief. Homelessness is no longer seen as intractable, and ending it is no longer seen as exceptional. It's expected.

**This future is not an impossible dream.** It is exactly what the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation had in mind in 2021, when it awarded Community Solutions \$100 million over five years to support Built for Zero, a movement of communities working to create a tipping point where homelessness is rare and brief. The goal: accelerate an end to homelessness for at least 75 populations in 50 U.S. communities by 2026.

In some places, you can already see this future unfolding. 105 communities have adopted the collaborative, public health approach to homelessness represented by Built for Zero. They have formed community-wide teams around the shared aim of ending homelessness. They know each unhoused person by name, in real-time. And guided by this information, they target resources to drive measurable reductions toward reaching functional zero homelessness, adjusting their strategy as the dynamics of homelessness in their community move and change.

This report features insights from our evaluation partners [ORS and Equal Measure](#), along with our own analysis of Year One of our five-year journey with the MacArthur Foundation's 100&Change award. This Executive Summary provides a snapshot of key findings.



## How we work

Homelessness results when people have crashed through layers upon layers of the social safety net. It is a result of systems and policies failing our communities and perpetuating the suffering and marginalization of some of our most vulnerable neighbors. We are working with communities and other partners to end this cycle.

### Systems are designed by people — and they can be redesigned.

In the United States, Built for Zero is now a movement of 105 communities committed to measurably and equitably ending homelessness. More than 70 million people — about a fifth of the U.S. population — live in these communities. Together, their leaders are building a new reality where homelessness is rare and brief, if it ever occurs. Communities that achieve this state, known as functional zero, must shift their approaches and systems from managing the crisis of homelessness to *eliminating* it.

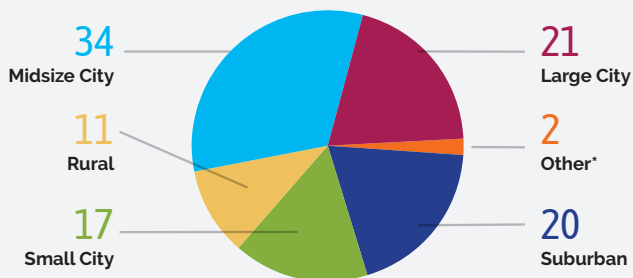
Community Solutions provides coaching, tools, and support to these communities while simultaneously working to change the broader conditions needed to help propel the field up and over a tipping point, a role that has been defined as a [“field catalyst.”](#)

To achieve these goals, we work with partners to drive changes at the local, regional, state, and federal levels and facilitate collaboration and learning across sectors and countries to support the broader movement to end homelessness. As we learn alongside the cities and counties participating in Built for Zero, we are also harnessing learning and evaluation, policy advocacy, and communications to transform conditions surrounding data, governance, and accountability.

## Features of a system designed to reduce and end homelessness

- A shared aim and belief that homelessness is solvable
- A collaborative, community-wide team that is accountable for reducing and ending homelessness
- High-quality data systems that support a culture of continuous improvement
- An aligned and effective coordinated system whereby all providers 1) allocate housing and services through a single process and according to shared protocol (also known as a coordinated entry system) and 2) participate in recurring, problem-solving efforts to collectively remove barriers to housing (also known as case conferencing)
- Establishment of a racially equitable homeless response system
- Policy mechanisms to clear structural and administrative barriers to ending homelessness
- Strategic, data-driven investments to reduce homelessness long-term and flexible financial resources to clear immediate barriers to housing

## What kind of communities are in Built for Zero?



\*The two communities in this category are West Virginia Balance of State and Downtown Cincinnati

# Accomplishments and challenges

We have provided a snapshot of key accomplishments, challenges, and learnings from Year One of our five-year journey with support from the MacArthur Foundation.

**This past year, communities demonstrated both the limits and costs of additional resources without the sufficient support and infrastructure to absorb them.** The health and human services workforce has been depleted, with attrition continuing to outpace hiring. Homeless service organizations that were already struggling with inadequate staffing, were tasked with absorbing significant new federal COVID-related funding. Despite the opportunity presented by the resources, many communities were not set up with the staffing, support, and processes to effectively allocate and expend the resources to drive lasting and measurable change. This phenomenon highlighted the critical importance of not only having sufficient resources to end homelessness, but having the organized, coordinated, and sufficiently supported systems to deploy them to achieve measurable and equitable reductions in homelessness.

**Despite the challenges that communities face, cities and counties are still driving toward zero.** Our survey found that 90% of Built for Zero communities that responded were “hopeful” to achieve functional zero, the milestone for making homelessness rare and brief. We saw more than reason for hope. In 2022, 20 communities achieved a downward shift, which means that a community has made a measurable, meaningful reduction in homelessness and a major improvement in their system. A shift occurs when the number of people experiencing homelessness fall above or below the median over the course of six consecutive months. This downward shift would, with statistical confidence, indicate that the baseline state of the system, or the definition of normal, has changed.



- **Communities that have reached functional zero:** 14
- **Functional zero proof points:** 17 (12 for veteran homelessness, 5 for chronic homelessness)
- **Communities that have achieved quality data:** 64
- **State partners:** 2 (Colorado, Maine)
- **Number of people housed by communities:** 13,029 housed in 2022 and 155,500 people total housed since 2015

**Large cities were among the communities demonstrating the possibility of progress.** In 2022, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated that rates of homelessness continued to rise, particularly in large cities on the West Coast. Against this backdrop, some cities inspired a sense of what is possible. For example, Detroit, the Metro Denver region, and Washington, D.C., reduced veteran homelessness by an average of 27% from 2020-2022, which was significantly higher than the national reduction in veteran homelessness of 11% over the same timeframe.

**To date, 64 Built for Zero communities have achieved quality data and know who is experiencing homelessness, by name, in real time.** You can't solve a problem you can't see, and communities have historically operated with a blurry snapshot of homelessness. Quality data is more like real-time video. It enables communities to understand who is experiencing homelessness, inflow and outflow, what strategies and investments result in reductions in homelessness, and where improvements are needed. With partners, we are exploring how to make quality data the standard, starting with improving technology and resources for staffing and training.

**The global movement is growing and moving toward zero, together.** Community Solutions provides design, strategy, and coaching support to other backbone organizations across the world that help communities measurably end homelessness. These groups include the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, which are driving national campaigns modeled on Built for Zero. Two communities in Canada — London, Ontario, and Medicine Hat, Alberta — have achieved functional zero for a population, and two more are in their “final kilometer” of achieving the milestone. Community Solutions also provides similar advisory and initiative design support to early-stage efforts in the United Kingdom, France, and Denmark.

**Achieving equitable systems is a necessary part of getting to zero homelessness.** Solving homelessness cannot be separated from eliminating the racial inequities within the homeless response system. We worked to ensure that our functional zero definitions for all populations, single adults, youth, or family homelessness requires communities to close all racial and ethnic disproportionality in housing placements, returns to homelessness, and the average length of time experiencing homelessness, from identification to housing placement. As part of this work, communities are also ensuring 1) people of color at all levels of the homeless response system have decision-making power to influence the design of the system and 2) that Black, Indigenous, and other people of color receiving services from the homeless response system have experiences that preserve their dignity and have their needs met in a timely manner.

**Improved coordination, repurposed existing properties, and social impact finance can increase access to affordable housing.** Building more affordable housing is critical, particularly in high-cost markets. Communities demonstrated that access could also be accelerated by improving the engagement of private landlords, converting shelter properties into housing, and preserving affordable housing using social impact capital. We found that social impact investors are ready to play their role, committing \$126 million to acquire more than 500 units of affordable housing to help end veteran homelessness.

**States and municipalities often lack a defined role within the existing homeless response system, and we are working to help change that.** State policymakers, legislators, and agency staffers lack insight into how states can leverage their resources and capacity to play a formal role in solving homelessness. This often leads to unrealized opportunities to influence land-use policy, health care funding (specifically Medicaid), criminal justice policy, and affordable housing finance. Community Solutions is compiling best practices and testing new models of state leadership in ending homelessness. Working with state government partners in Colorado and Maine, we are identifying high-leverage practices and governance models that can be shared with other states.

**The conversation around key solutions to homelessness is growing, but it is still being outpaced by the broader conversation around homelessness.** According to the media monitoring tool Meltwater, the volume of social media conversation about solving homelessness in the United States increased 420% in 2022 from the previous year. Conversations directly related to accountability for a measurable end state to homelessness (functional zero), homelessness as a systems problem, the role of by-name or quality data, the Built for Zero methodology, and the assertion that homelessness is solvable, increased significantly to match about 16% of that solutions-oriented conversation. While this demonstrates progress, we cannot ignore that the volume of conversation focused on the crisis of homelessness continues to vastly outpace the conversation around solutions.

# A final word

The achievements of communities and partners from Year One are profoundly inspiring. They are also only the beginning. Communities in Built for Zero are primed to continue proving it is possible to make homelessness rare and brief, everywhere.

This future is not an impossible dream. It is a moral imperative, a different set of choices, and a reality within our collective reach.

## Homelessness is solvable.

We are grateful for every partner that is playing a part in proving it.



**For a lasting end  
to homelessness  
that leaves  
no one behind**

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