

Audit Report

# Homelessness Assistance Audit Series: Coordination of the City's Homelessness Assistance Efforts

December 2017



Addressing the issue of homelessness requires a coordinated, multi-department response from the City. However, the City only recently started to coordinate its homelessness assistance efforts and does not have a dedicated position or group assigned to this task. Several U.S. cities have created a position or agency within the City to coordinate homelessness assistance efforts. Without a coordinated effort, the City may not effectively provide homelessness assistance services, efficiently allocate resources, and may miss opportunities to aid people experiencing homelessness.

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Cover: 7th Street, Office of the City Auditor.

## Objective

The objective of this audit was to determine if the City coordinates homelessness assistance efforts to achieve desired outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

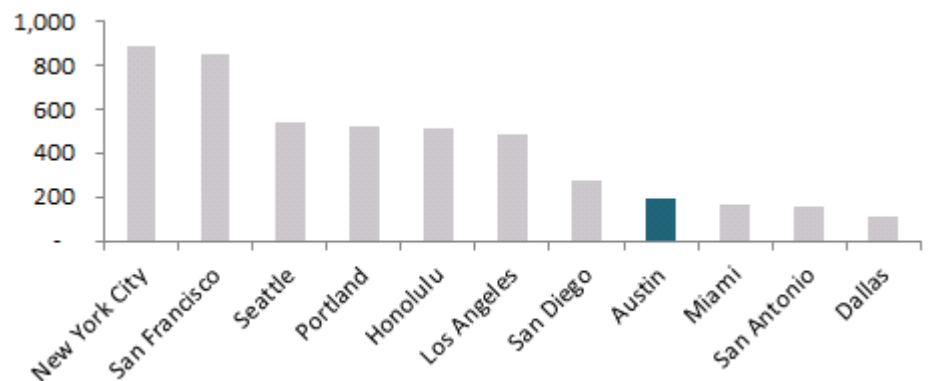
Due to the complex nature of the topic, we are evaluating the City's homelessness assistance efforts in a series of audits. This report is the second in the series. The first report, presented in November 2017, analyzed how City ordinances align with the City's homelessness assistance efforts. Future reports are planned to analyze how the City allocates resources to address homelessness, and the outcomes of these efforts.

## Background

More than 7,000 people used homelessness assistance services in 2016, a 14% increase since 2013.

One day each year, Austin's Ending Community Homelessness Organization (ECHO) coordinates a count of the City's homeless population. This annual "Point in Time Count" is required for communities that receive funding from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. The 2017 count identified a total of just over 2,000 people experiencing homelessness in Austin, which is similar to the results of previous counts.<sup>1</sup> However, ECHO noted in its 2017 "Needs and Gaps" report that more than 7,000 people used homelessness services in 2016, a 14% increase since 2013. When compared to the counts done by other cities in 2016 (as shown in Exhibit 1), Austin had more people experiencing homelessness per capita than other large Texas cities. However, Austin's count was significantly lower than several other cities that received Federal funding in 2016.

**Exhibit 1: 2016 Rate of Homeless Per 100,000 People in Select U.S. Cities**



SOURCE: OCA analysis of Point in Time counts conducted by various Continuum of Care organizations, September 2017.

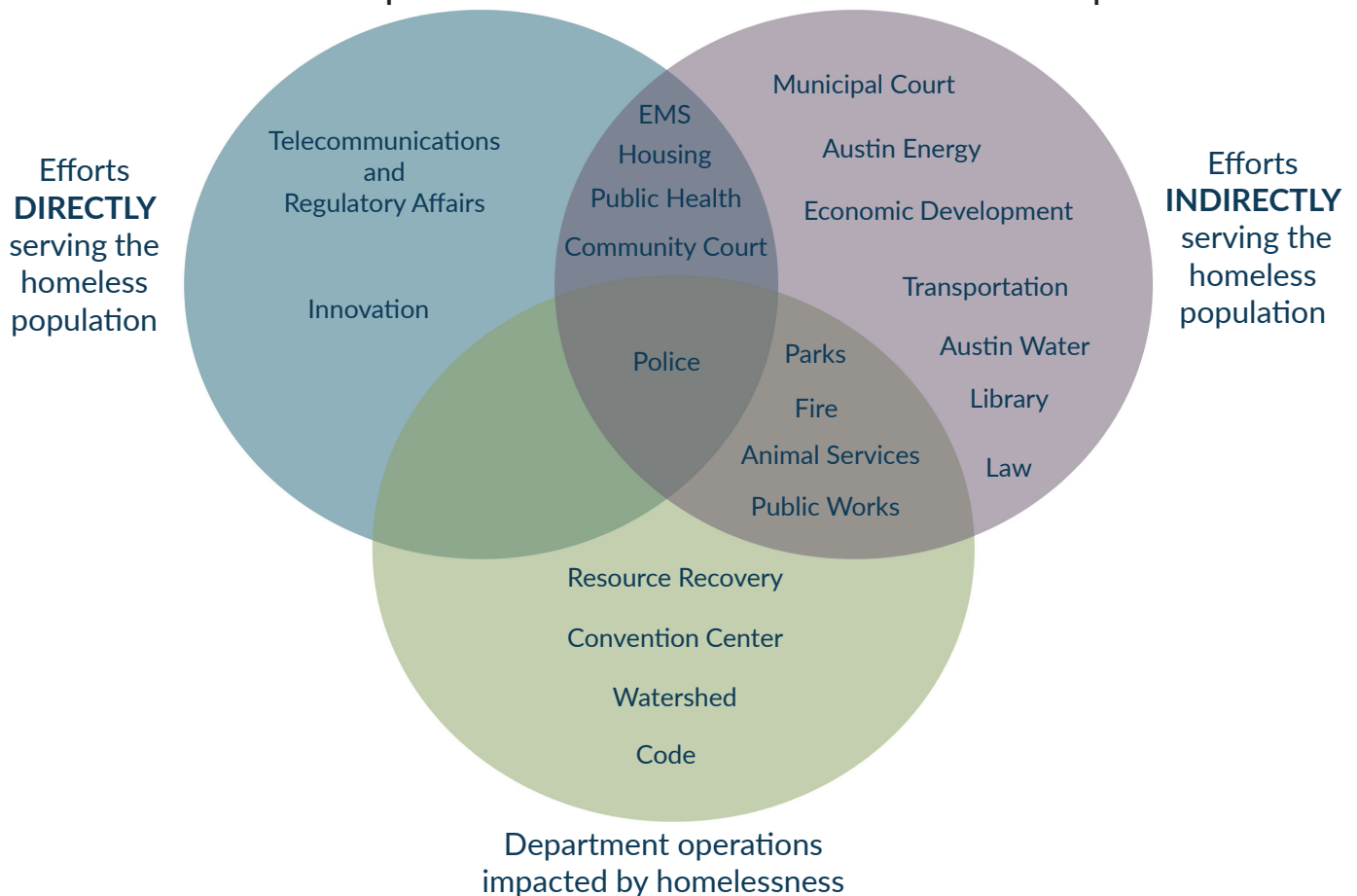
<sup>1</sup> The count identified 832 people sleeping in shelters, 834 unsheltered people, and 370 people in transitional housing.

At least 20 City departments have programs, activities, or services that are affected by homelessness. Generally, department efforts can be classified in three ways:

- Efforts directly associated with homelessness assistance, such as programs to connect people experiencing homelessness to services. An example is Austin Public Health, which manages contracts for homeless shelters.
- Efforts indirectly associated with homelessness assistance, such as programs for all residents that may be used by people experiencing homelessness. An example is the Economic Development Department, which provides workforce development training that is offered to all residents, but which may be used by someone experiencing homelessness.
- Efforts associated with the impacts of homelessness. An example is the Watershed Protection Department, which deals with the impact of homeless camps on creeks.

In many cases, a department's efforts will fall into more than category, as shown in Exhibit 2 below.

**Exhibit 2: Department Efforts Related to Homelessness Often Overlap**



SOURCE: OCA interviews with sample of City departments and analysis of the City's homelessness assistance efforts, October 2017.

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# What We Found

## Summary

Addressing the issue of homelessness requires a coordinated, multi-department response from the City. However, the City only recently started to coordinate its homelessness assistance efforts and does not have a dedicated position or group assigned to this task. Several U.S. cities have created a position or group within the city to coordinate homelessness assistance efforts. Without a coordinated effort, the City may not effectively provide homelessness assistance services, efficiently allocate resources, and may miss opportunities to aid people experiencing homelessness.

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## Finding

The City does not have a position or agency to coordinate its homelessness assistance efforts, resulting in reduced effectiveness and efficiency and potential missed opportunities to aid people experiencing homelessness. However, limited coordination efforts are underway.

Addressing the issue of homelessness requires a coordinated, multi-department response from the City. In recent years, several other cities have created an internal position or group to coordinate homelessness assistance efforts. As shown in Exhibit 3 below, this ranges from a single position to an entire department.

**Exhibit 3: Examples of How Other Cities Coordinate Homelessness Assistance Efforts**

City	Method of Coordination
San Diego	Mayor's Senior Advisor on Homeless Coordination
Dallas	Homeless Commission
San Francisco	Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing

SOURCE: OCA analysis of practices in peer cities, October 2017.

Although the Imagine Austin plan calls for the City to “coordinate between all the organizations providing services to the homeless community to maximize the efficacy of limited resources,” Austin does not have a dedicated position or group to coordinate homelessness assistance. The City also lacks a comprehensive strategic plan to guide City efforts. The City created a strategic plan for homelessness in 2004, which has since been updated by ECHO.<sup>2</sup> However, ECHO does not have the authority to direct City activities.

The City does coordinate some activities, but these are limited in scope. One example is the Homelessness Outreach Street Team (HOST). This was a pilot program that started in June 2016 to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness. It is a partnership between some City departments and third parties involved with homelessness. However, it is mainly focused on public safety issues in the downtown area. Additionally, the City Manager recently created a team to develop a Homelessness Action Plan. This group has identified several tasks to accomplish, including identifying current City services, gathering data related to

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<sup>2</sup> In 2010 ECHO published its “Plan to End Community Homelessness”, which states that is an update on the City’s 2004 plan. ECHO also published a draft report in September 2017 which outlines actions to end homelessness.



homelessness, and evaluating homelessness contracts. However, this team does not have dedicated resources. City staff's participation on this team is in addition to their regular job duties and the person tasked with leading the team is currently serving in an interim role.

Coordination is necessary because many City departments (as shown in Exhibit 2) are involved with, or impacted by the issue of homelessness. This includes departments with efforts that directly assist people experiencing homelessness, efforts that indirectly assist them, or have efforts related to the community impacts of homelessness.<sup>3</sup> Few departments reported that they had training or guidance for staff about how to interact with people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, departments often reported that they were not collecting data related to the impact of homelessness on their department operations.

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At least 20 City departments are involved with or impacted by the issue of homelessness.

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The lack of a coordinated effort to deal with the issue of homelessness results in many issues for the City. It creates inefficiencies, such as multiple departments that manage contracts for homelessness assistance. It can also lead to ineffective operations. As an example, Austin Resource Recovery has cleaned downtown alleys for a number of years. This results in water containing human waste being washed into downtown creeks. This impact was only recently identified and the department indicated that they are now working with the Watershed Protection Department to mitigate the impact of these cleaning efforts.

A lack of coordination can also lead to missed opportunities to aid people experiencing homelessness. For example, locating social workers from Austin Public Health in libraries could result in the ability to connect more people experiencing homelessness to services. City programs to assist low-income residents may also be used to identify people at risk of losing their housing. This may allow the City to help them avoid becoming homeless. Lastly, external entities working on homelessness may have difficulty connecting with the appropriate resources within the City.

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix A includes a list of department identified by the audit team as having homelessness assistance efforts. It is not meant to be comprehensive.

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# Recommendations and Management Response

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The City Manager should designate a position within the City whose primary responsibility is coordinating the homelessness assistance efforts in Austin. This position should:

- Develop a strategic plan to address homelessness, and
- Coordinate City department's efforts related to homelessness.

**Management Response:** Agree

**Proposed Implementation Plan:** Sara Hensley, Interim Assistant City Manager is currently coordinating the City effort, leading a multi-department team. Sara has recently borrowed a staff member to assist with the work related to the Homelessness efforts. However, this person is also working with Sara on the Graffiti Initiatives as well. The overall strategy will be to request a full time position through the 2018-19, Budget Process, that will have a primary responsibility of coordinating homeless efforts.

The City's Homelessness Team is mapping current efforts, both within City departments and among external stakeholders. We are identifying funding sources, needs, and critical gaps in services as well as leveraging the findings from the City Auditor's Homelessness Assistance Audit Series. Once we fully understand the current state, we can begin to develop a three (3) to five (5) year strategy. The overall goal is to assess the City's role and align resources to ensure that the most significant impact supports the City's Strategic Planning efforts.

The City Team will work with stakeholders to develop and implement comprehensive and coordinated approaches to reduce the number of persons experiencing homelessness in Austin. Approaches will include the prevention of homelessness, support for recovery from homelessness, and delivery of services in coordination with external agencies, including a near-term solution to alleviate health & safety issues in the downtown area. The City will leverage and improve on the use of data, technology, and human-centered design while encouraging improvement and innovation across sectors. In addition, we will highlight recommended objectives that tie to the Strategic Plan.

**Tasks:**

The following is a draft list of near-term tasks the City Team will undertake as part of the strategy implementation. This is in addition to the ten (10) homelessness related resolutions that are under review and action plans being developed.

- Task 1: Define and map current services across the City of Austin, (COA) including those provided by city and county agencies, non-profit stakeholders, and the faith community;
- Task 2: Leverage mapping and engagement per Task 1 to define COA role in prevention, recovery, and delivery of services;
- Task 3: Define scope and performance criteria for contracts supported by the City to address homelessness. Performance criteria will align with the indicators and metrics developed as part of the Strategic Planning effort;
- Task 4: Assess costs and benefits associated with concentrated service delivery (downtown core) compared to a dispersed service delivery model through community providers;
- Task 5: Work with stakeholders to develop and expand on common database/data set, and technologies for accessing information, (including option for mobile technology).

**Proposed Implementation Date:** October 1, 2018

## Appendix A: List of Department Efforts Related to Homelessness Assistance

Department	Effort
Animal Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treating and housing pets of people experiencing homelessness</li> <li>• Assisting other departments who interact with homeless populations</li> </ul>
Austin Code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to complaints about abandoned properties and debris</li> </ul>
Austin Convention Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring the safety and satisfaction of convention attendees</li> </ul>
Austin Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing utility payment assistance</li> </ul>
Austin Fire Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to medical emergency calls</li> <li>• Responding to structure fires where the structure may be being used by people experiencing homelessness</li> <li>• Responding to fires at homeless camps</li> </ul>
Austin Police Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enforcement of laws and ordinances</li> <li>• Participating in HOST</li> <li>• Assisting other departments who interact with homeless populations</li> </ul>
Austin Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing contracts related to homelessness assistance</li> <li>• Providing health services to low-income residents</li> </ul>
Austin Public Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operating library facilities</li> </ul>
Austin Resource Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping public spaces clean and hygienic</li> <li>• Cleaning streets and alleys</li> </ul>
Austin Transportation Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing pedestrian death and injury on roadways</li> </ul>
Austin/Travis County Emergency Medical Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to calls related to medical emergencies</li> <li>• Participating in HOST</li> </ul>
Austin Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing utility payment assistance</li> </ul>
Downtown Austin Community Court	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing case management services to people experiencing homelessness</li> <li>• Providing judicial services to residents</li> </ul>
Economic Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing contracts for workforce development training</li> </ul>
Innovation Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administering the Bloomberg Innovation Grant</li> </ul>
Law Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prosecuting cases in Downtown Austin Community Court and Municipal Court</li> </ul>
Municipal Court	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing judicial services to residents</li> </ul>
Neighborhood Housing and Community Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing contracts related to homelessness assistance</li> <li>• Managing affordability programs</li> </ul>
Parks and Recreation Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleaning City parks</li> <li>• Operating recreation centers</li> </ul>
Public Works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleaning streets and alleys</li> <li>• Installing temporary toilet facilities</li> </ul>
Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing contract to provide technology training at the ARCH</li> </ul>
Watershed Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping the creeks and watersheds clear of debris and clean</li> </ul>

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## Scope

The audit scope included the City's current efforts to coordinate homelessness assistance.

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## Methodology

To complete this audit, we performed the following steps:

- Interviewed staff with multiple City departments;
- Researched practices in peer cities;
- Attended meetings for HOST and the City's homelessness task force;
- Reviewed documentation related to department programs and activities;
- Evaluated City programs for people experiencing homelessness; and
- Evaluated internal controls related to the City's coordination efforts.

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## Audit Standards

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.



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The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. We conduct performance audits to review aspects of a City service or program and provide recommendations for improvement.

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