

# COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT ON HOMELESSNESS IN COLUMBUS AND FRANKLIN COUNTY

Key Themes from Community + Stakeholder Engagement

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## INTRODUCTION

Community Shelter Board (CSB), in collaboration with Focus Strategies and RAMA Consulting, conducted a comprehensive assessment to evaluate the current state of the homelessness response system in Columbus and Franklin County. The assessment sought to gather community input, analyze data, and provide strategic recommendations for improving the response to homelessness. Key stakeholders included CSB partner agencies, members of the Continuum of Care (CoC), local organizations serving people experiencing homelessness, individuals with lived experiences of homelessness, and the general community.

## METHODOLOGY

1. **Community Survey:** An electronic survey was open for 60 days, collecting 546 responses from across Franklin County. Respondents were diverse in their connection to homelessness, ranging from personal experiences to professional involvement. Demographic representation skewed slightly away from the county's actual demographic composition.
2. **CSB Provider Surveys:** Surveys were distributed to 16 CSB providers, yielding 29 responses from executive directors, program directors, and direct service supervisors. These surveys focused on service delivery challenges and strategic insights.
3. **Continuum of Care (CoC) Survey:** Surveys were sent to all 41 CoC members, with 17 responses from various sectors including local government, law enforcement, and community advocates. The survey addressed service coordination and emerging best practices.
4. **Organizational Interviews:** Interviews with 11 local agencies provided insights into service gaps and collaboration opportunities outside of current CSB-funded programs.
5. **Focus Groups:** Four focus groups with 21 participants offered detailed feedback on lived experiences with homelessness and housing insecurity. These groups included diverse demographics, including people of color and gender non-conforming individuals.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Strengths of the Current System:

1. **Collaboration and Communication:** Stakeholders valued the coordination among service providers and the dedication of those involved in homelessness response. Differences emerged in focus areas:
  - **Organizations:** Emphasized outreach and relationship-building.
  - **CSB Providers:** Highlighted coordinated entry and data-driven decisions.
  - **CoC Members:** Stressed diversity, equity, and local partnerships.
2. **Outreach and Support:** Organizations praised effective outreach efforts and the importance of strong relationships with clients. Successful collaborations with partner agencies were also highlighted as essential in addressing homelessness.
3. **Coordinated Services:** CSB providers emphasized the strength of the coordinated entry process and data collection, which have been crucial in addressing homelessness efficiently. They also highlighted the success of specific programs for vulnerable populations.

4. **Resource Availability:** CoC members appreciated the availability of shelters and resources, along with a focus on diversity and equity to address racial disparities in homelessness.

#### **Challenges in the Current Homelessness Response System:**

1. **Affordable Housing Shortage:** All groups identified the lack of affordable housing as the most pressing challenge. This shortage is exacerbated by systemic barriers, such as landlords' reluctance to accept tenants with criminal records or addiction histories.
2. **Systemic Barriers and Racial Disparities:** Providers and organizations pointed out systemic racial discrimination and the need for better coordination across service systems. The over-representation of Black and brown individuals in the homeless population was a particular concern.
3. **Mental Health and Addiction Services:** There was a consensus on the need for better mental health and addiction services, with existing services often inadequate to meet the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness.
4. **Service Delivery Barriers:** CoC members noted issues like long wait times and lack of formal response when services are full, leading to gaps in service delivery and increased unsheltered homelessness.
5. **Flexibility and Person-Centric Services:** There was a call for more flexible services that cater to the individual needs of diverse populations, including LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities.

#### **Emerging Needs and Underserved Populations:**

Stakeholders identified several underserved populations, including childless adults, LGBTQ+ individuals, families with children, and immigrants. There was also a noted need for trauma-informed care and better accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The importance of flexibility in service provision to meet varied needs was emphasized.

#### **Concerns about the Future:**

There is a significant concern that the influx of large companies and resulting gentrification will further exacerbate the housing crisis, pushing out low-income residents and potentially increasing homelessness. Stakeholders stressed the need for a comprehensive action plan focusing on affordable housing development and better support for low-income residents.

## **CONCLUSION**

The assessment reveals a complex landscape of strengths and challenges within the homelessness response system in Columbus and Franklin County. While there is strong collaboration and dedication among stakeholders, the critical shortage of affordable housing, systemic barriers, and the need for better mental health services remain significant hurdles. Moving forward, a comprehensive, inclusive, and flexible approach is essential to effectively address homelessness.