

Solving Homelessness: How Project Roomkey Uncovers the Need for Creative and Innovative Solutions

By: Chrissy Berry



Stuart Malcon, a San Francisco Doctor, speaks with a homeless man about the dangers of COVID-19 and living on the streets. Picture Credits: Josh Edelson from KQED

Before COVID-19 surged throughout the globe, the State of California was already suffering from a public health crisis. Nearly [3/4 of the 150,000 homeless people](#) in the Golden State were living without shelter -- which presented large risks in public safety and public health. It is now 8 months since the start of the pandemic, and the homeless rates are rising parallel to COVID-19 cases. When looking at the cause of homelessness through a lens that puts aside all preconceived opinions, one can see that homelessness is caused by low-wage jobs, lack of affordable housing, and poverty, not just alcohol and drugs. Even though Legislation has been passed to extend the eviction moratorium and allow tenants to pay rent late, many individuals were unable to stay afloat while the monthly income was dwindling away. With a lack of affordable housing in California, it seems almost impossible to move individuals straight from shelters and tents into permanent housing. The homeless

crisis in California urgently demands a creative and innovative solution to place the homeless population into permanent housing.

What has the state of California been doing for the homeless since COVID-19 arrived?

Project Roomkey

In March of 2020, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced Project Roomkey, a [“first in the nation initiative”](#) program created to secure empty motel and hotel rooms for the homeless population. This was a frantic move to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and create viable long-term housing options for those who need them. The ultimate goal is to find permanent housing for each person, opening up rooms for more of the homeless. Not only is this program intended to house the homeless, but it also brings business to hotels that are struggling with vacancies amid the pandemic. Project Roomkey includes [\\$150 million in state funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) which provides up to 75% of reimbursements for the hotels and services to operate the hotels. These services include support staff, nonprofit providers, nursing staff, 24/7 security, and food delivery service three times a day.



The graphic features a blue background with a white key icon and the text 'Project Roomkey HOTEL / MOTEL CRISIS HOUSING'. Below this, the word 'Services' is written in white, followed by the subtitle 'CREATIVE WAYS TO ASSIST THE HOMELESS INTO PERMANENT HOUSING'. Three light blue boxes are arranged horizontally, each containing a partnership category and a list of services.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE DMV	PARTNERSHIP WITH LEGAL SERVICES	PARTNERSHIP WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• PROVIDING IDENTIFICATION FOR EVERY HOMELESS INDIVIDUAL WHO ENTERED PROJECT ROOMKEY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ASSISTING IN CLEARING RECORDS AND SMALL TICKET VIOLATIONS AMONG THE HOMELESS POPULATION• VITAL STEP IN PLACING THE HOMELESS INTO PERMANENT HOUSING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• EDUCATE AND ENSURE EVERY HOMELESS INDIVIDUAL WAS GETTING THE BENEFITS THEY ARE ELIGIBLE FOR• THESE BENEFITS INCLUDE: CALFRESH AND SSI

Source: Chrissy Berry & Heidi Marston of LAHSA

Medical Shelters

The state of California has been providing medical shelter sites to serve the homeless population as well as individuals who cannot safely isolate or quarantine in their permanent residence. There is no cost to the sheltering sites, and the hotels and motels are on a contract with each county for 75% reimbursement by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Who can go to the medical shelters:

1. People who are COVID positive and need to isolate and shelter in place.
2. People who are COVID symptomatic, waiting for test results, and need to be isolating.
3. People experiencing homelessness who are not symptomatic but have been exposed to COVID- positive individuals.

This is different from project Roomkey because Project Roomkey does not allow anyone with symptomatic or asymptomatic COVID-19. This program is not specific to homeless people, and with the medical shelter’s reaching 100% capacity on most nights, it can be very difficult for the homeless to get into the Medical Shelter. In Los Angeles County, there are currently [345 clients in these shelters](#), which is far from the number of homeless individuals who are suffering from COVID-19. This is a shocking number when comparing it to the [1.13 million cases of COVID-19](#) reported in Los Angeles County as of February 5th, 2021.

Current Medical Sheltering Locations:		
Location	Date operational	Number of Clients*
Pomona Fairplex	3/25/20	161
MLK Recuperative Center	3/25/20	2
Sherman Hotel	3/27/20	36
David L. Murphy	4/27/20	10
Holiday Inn DT Long Beach	12/11/20	42
Willow Tree Inn	12/14/20	49
Vagabond Inn	12/22/20	40
Western Q/I	12/31/20	5
Total		345

**Number of clients is reported as of 0800 today. This number will fluctuate daily as clients arrive/are discharged.*

*This chart shows the Medical Shelters that are currently operating in Los Angeles County.
Source: https://covid19.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2.5.21_COVID-19_Update_FINAL.pdf*

Where is Project Roomkey now?

The success of Project Roomkey has been underwhelming, leaving thousands of the intended without shelter. Even after another [\\$62 million in emergency funding](#) was granted towards the project, individuals were still not placed into permanent housing. When the program was initially launched, the idea of implementing a quarantine protocol within the hotels sounded straightforward. But, life inside of the hotel rooms was not exactly what people imagined. They suffered from intense and unnecessary quarantine restrictions and were only allowed to leave the hotel if they had a medical appointment or were being transported by a provider.

These were not the only disappointing aspects of Project Roomkey. Unfortunately, as the leases on the hotels ended, the program was left with little to no permanent housing to offer for the homeless. Support and funding for the project began to dwindle. In November, only [5% of Roomkey clients were actually placed into permanent housing](#), leaving the others to stay on the streets. One of the biggest issues that came about when placing individuals into permanent housing was the fact that California lacks affordable housing options. With more money than ever being put into the project, it is upsetting to see this lack of foresight resulting in temporary and ineffective solutions. San Francisco and Los Angeles are going extra lengths to keep the state responsible for the homeless population. Lawyers in San Francisco have filed a lawsuit against the city for negligence to take action for the homeless, and The LA Alliance for Human rights is suing the city because of the [“unsafe and inhumane conditions”](#) of the homeless encampments.



Homeless encampments taking over streets in San Francisco that previously were not present before COVID-19.

Source:

[https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/philmatier/article/As-if-SF-s-Tenderloin-didn-t-have-enough-15290365.p](https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/philmatier/article/As-if-SF-s-Tenderloin-didn-t-have-enough-15290365.php)
[hp](#)

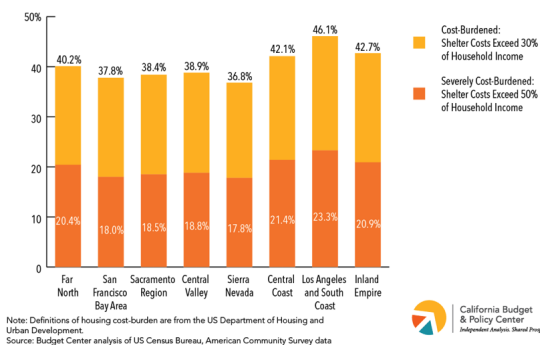
If Project Roomkey has disappointed thus far, why does it matter?

It brings to light deeper issues such as affordable housing

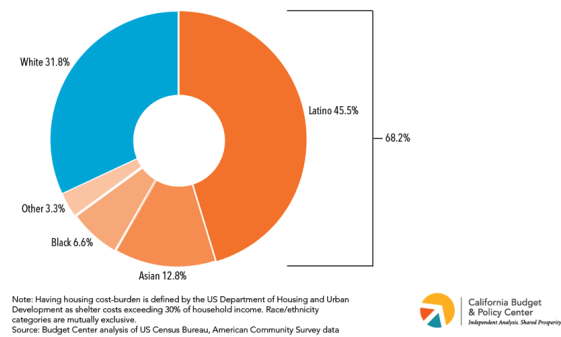
The fact that once the leases ended the program could not find permanent housing showcases the seriousness of the lack of affordable housing in California. High housing forces individuals onto the street *and* makes it close to impossible to move from the streets into housing. Unaffordable housing costs means that the [cost of living exceeds 30% of income](#). Disappointedly enough, this is occurring in nearly [4 in 10 households in California](#). This is a shockingly high number and this statistic needs to be recognized. When COVID-19 ripped through the US, many individuals lost their jobs which was significantly devastating to households monthly income. When housing costs for the month exceed 30% of one's monthly income, it becomes extremely difficult for them to maintain financial stability. Unaffordable housing forced many households to leave their permanent housing and find a shelter or encampment. Without a home or sufficient income, obtaining affordable housing becomes even more difficult for these individuals. The lack of affordable housing not only forced many into homelessness, but it also acts as a barrier out of homelessness. If people can not afford to live somewhere anymore, it is a far stretch to say that people who are homeless can afford to move into permanent housing.

The state needs to strategize how to increase affordability to allow individuals to remain in and obtain affordable housing options. This is a vital step towards placing families, women, and men into a stable living condition.

Housing Costs Are Unaffordable Throughout California
Percentage of Households With Housing Cost-Burden or Severe Housing Cost-Burden, 2015



More Than 2 in 3 Californians With Unaffordable Housing Costs Are People of Color
Race/Ethnicity of Individuals in Households With Housing Cost-Burden, 2015



Lack of affordable housing has ripped through the US, breaking apart the 30% rule and leaving citizens to pay extremely high prices for shelter. Unaffordable housing disproportionately hurts people of color as well. Source: California Budget & Policy Center

It shows a creative and innovative way of thinking that we have not seen before

Even though Project Roomkey has been unable to move all of the homeless into hotels and motels, it shows a breakthrough from traditional and ordinary solutions to solving homelessness. Years after years we have seen the State and Federal Government push money into solutions for homelessness. Yet, in California, the rate of homelessness keeps increasing. It is time for the government to step up and start thinking more creatively about the issues that are hindering Project Roomkey from being an effective program. This program has shown that California can adapt to large changes and utilize resources that benefit both parties. Project Roomkey did not start perfectly, but the ability to launch a creative solution amidst a pandemic shows hope for the future. If Project Roomkey has been executed more effectively by anticipating the lack of affordable housing, just could have been massively successful.

Project Roomkey is not over

On December 18th, 2020 Governor Gavin Newsom announced that the Federal Emergency Management Agency will [permanently fund Project Roomkey until the end of the pandemic](#). The funding announcement was vague and still did not address the issues of permanent housing after the hotel leases end.

The announcement shows some hope for the future of the program as well as the homeless looking for a better living situation than tents and shelters. It is time for this program to step up and fix its downfalls in 2020. They *need* to expand the number of hotels across the state to accommodate for a large number of individuals without a stable living situation. Or, fast track the legislature to bring more affordable housing into the state. This will allow for more people to be admitted into the hotels, placed into permanent housing, and then bring in a new wave of homeless. This project has the capability to be a new, innovative, and creative solution to homelessness and it is possible that with some improvement the program can be beneficial to all. If this program can provide hotels to more than just 5% of the population and carry through on their promises to transition them into permanent housing, there is a possibility that Project Roomkey may just be the creative and innovative solution to homelessness during COVID-19.



This image shows how happy people can be when they are placed in a hotel room. Source: <https://covid19.lacounty.gov/project-roomkey/>

What are “tiny houses” for the homeless?

In 2020, we have seen a new solution to bring the homeless off of the streets and into a form of housing. This form of housing can be considered a ‘tiny’ house -- with the main goal being to provide a safer place to live as the pandemic surges.

Tiny houses in action -- Isla Vista

In Isla Vista, California a small community outside of Santa Barbara has brought in 20 tiny pallet shelter homes. This program is being funded by the CARES act and the company behind it all is called Pallet. Pallet seeks to give personal and safe shelters to provide a [“stepping stone out of homelessness and into a life of stability.”](#)

How the shelters get put up: In less than a day, Pallet can put up an entire community of the Pallet shelters.

Inside of the shelter: drop down bed, bins under the bed for storage, heating, and power outlets

Outside of the shelter: locked personal storage area, showers, restrooms, food services

Personalized experience: each person will receive assistance the entire time, connection to services and housing through partnerships with the Good Samaritan Shelter, Isla Vista Community services, and the County of Santa Barbara



This image depicts the 20 tiny homes that were set up in Isla Vista. Source: <https://keyt.com/news/safety/2020/12/10/work-underway-for-20-new-tiny-homes-for-the-ista-vista-homeless/>

Why do tiny houses matter?

Tiny house communities such as the one placed in Isla Vista show a creative and innovative solution to giving homeless people an opportunity to get back on their feet. Pallet says they are full of “energy, ideas, and people” who are ready to give solutions to the homeless crisis. These houses are relatively cheap to put up, especially when comparing them to the price of building a shelter that would house the same amount of people. These houses also give specialized attention to each person who is staying there, making sure they get all of the services they need to find permanent housing. Giving a homeless person their own tiny house to live in creates a sense of dignity that can give the confidence to find a way out of homelessness. Tiny houses can help decrease the stigma that surrounds homelessness and show society that these are humans too, just like everyone else. They are humans that want nothing more than a roof over their head.

Ideas such as the tiny houses have great implications for the future of homelessness. The fact that the issue of homelessness has not been solved shows that the previous solutions were not working. To solve homelessness it is vital to step outside of the box, take away the stigmatization, increase affordable housing, and assist people off of the streets.

For additional information, please visit:

<https://nationalhomeless.org>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources>

<https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/04/03/at-newly-converted-motel-governor-newsom-launches-project-roomkey-a-first-in-the-nation-initiative-to-secure-hotel-motel-rooms-to-protect-homeless-individuals-from-covid-19/>

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