

NEW Reviews

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August 26, 2022

Pathways Home: A Regional Homelessness Action Plan for Local and Tribal Governments

Maricopa Association of Governments, October 28, 2021

Homelessness is a costly fact of life for individuals, neighborhoods, businesses, and governments throughout Arizona, and especially in metro Phoenix. Since the modern era of homelessness took off in the 1980s, public, private, philanthropic, and nonprofit entities have worked to relieve it with an evolving set of federal, state, and local policies and programs for an array of reasons and residents. Homelessness declined for much of the 2010s¹, but its scope and scale began to increase again even before Covid. By January 2022, the point-in-time count² for the Maricopa Regional Continuum of Care tallied 9,026 “sheltered” and “unsheltered” residents, compared to 7,419 in 2020. (The point-in-time count is frequently cited as a benchmark, but leaders in the field assume many residents who are homeless are missed, making the actual number higher.)

In response to growing numbers, costs, and impacts, leaders from 27 cities and towns, two counties, three Native nations, and scores of public, philanthropic, academic, and nonprofit entities came together, coordinated by Maricopa Association of Governments, to find a new approach. *Pathways Home: A Regional Homelessness Action Plan for Local and Tribal Governments* presents the results of their research and deliberations.

As the *Pathways Home* authors discuss, housing—particularly affordable and low-cost housing—has become a hot topic in metro Phoenix. Such factors as population growth, building and economic shifts, and fewer resources for affordable developments have changed the housing landscape and exacerbated homelessness. Covid’s economic and social consequences, effects of substance use and mental illness, and ease of evictions have contributed too. Affordable options are limited, and high costs and competition for available units are grim realities. Residents are increasingly being pushed out of long-term situations. Despite the difficulties however, experience has shown that various policies, more and better services, and creative collaborations, institutions, and investments can reduce homelessness and improve Arizonans’ lives. *Pathways Home* may be the “first-ever” regional plan, but it draws on decades of work on this quality of life problem.

¹ *State of Homelessness*, 2020, Arizona Department of Economic Security, December 2020

² This annual study is required by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. The 2021 study was not done due to Covid.

Three headline actions and 14 strategies are at the heart of the initiative. Reducing homelessness by 25 percent by July 2027 is the first target.

Action 1: **Commit to work regionally to reduce homelessness.** Through a public information campaign to reduce stigma; improving access to data; developing regional resources; tracking progress and consolidating information.

Action2: **Increase safe housing options.** Through adding 770 units of temporary housing; 1225 more units of permanent housing (rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing); increasing access to and maintaining existing rental units; assessing and enhancing the “coordinated entry system”; and supporting eviction prevention activities.

Action 3: **Support diverse partnerships to address homelessness.** Through increasing regional support for homelessness interventions through the emergency response and criminal justice system; increasing access to local services; expanding employment opportunities; forming interdepartmental teams; increasing coordination among levels of government.

Pathways Home is notable and far-reaching, even if overdue. The high stakes for the region are clear, while its regionalism is foundational, not just aspirational. A sense of urgency is evident, as is a newfound, perhaps even profound, political will.

The authors detail realistic steps, leadership, and timelines to marshal technical expertise, multi-sector persistence, intergovernmental coordination, and hard dollars to reduce homelessness and the housing disparities that often lead to it, especially among Native American and Black residents. Mechanisms are described to monitor financial commitments and to track initiatives and dollars.

This approach makes significant wins possible. Indeed, MAG’s web site highlights numerous accomplishments already. However, looking ahead, it does not ensure them. Results will be affected by regional leaders’ next choices and those from the many other entities engaged in fighting homelessness. Economic and political trends will matter too. For dramatic progress to become a reality, *Pathways Home* has to be implemented effectively, pursued relentlessly, and adapted continually, as promised. Success in three interdependent aspects of the plan could make the difference.

Coordination, including among levels of government, must be practiced and managed on a massive scale. Many local, tribal, and state agencies, private, and nonprofit entities have significant experience in and plans for homelessness, and additional federal and state and Covid-related funds are, in part, why progress is on tap now. These resources underpin expansion of proven strategies and enhance the capacity to try others. But considering the time and leadership needed to get things done and the persistence of opposition and obstacles to affordable housing and homelessness services, effective coordination—plus persuasive communications—will have to be

hallmarks for the field over years. Players from every sector will have to deliver on their current commitments and more, including tough policy changes. MAG's Progress to Date warrants watching, since hundreds of programs and millions of dollars are already in play and can help or hinder coordination.

The "diverse partnerships" envisioned are central to coordination and innovation among a myriad of entities. Combining different resources and ensuring that public, private, and nonprofit efforts in place, on the horizon, or not yet considered really happen and work well are fundamental.

A complex web exists to deal with homelessness. The field has its jargon and unique administrative systems and processes. *Pathways Home* identifies ways to improve operations and spur innovations. As imperative as these items are, better numbers and tools must also tell stories and answer questions to enhance long-term political and public support.

Pathways Home assumes an insider's knowledge of homelessness and housing, but that shouldn't deter business owners, neighborhood leaders, residents, and elected officials from being involved in this vital effort to address one of the most vexing of regional problems.

If, in coming years, the leadership and efforts detailed in this plan live up to their promise, many residents will avoid or escape homelessness. Everyday life will improve. Regionalism will be enhanced. The power of working together will be clear once again. But the possibility of more hardship across more communities over more years cannot be ignored. The choices for a better regional future are as clear as the *Pathways Home*.