

Homelessness in Arizona

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State-of-Emergency Initiative to Shelter 100% of Arizona's Homeless Population in the First 30 Days of a New Administration

Executive Summary

Arizona currently spends close to \$933 million to \$1.1 billion annually across government and nonprofit entities responding to homelessness, a system employing thousands of staff and volunteers statewide. Despite unprecedented spending, homelessness has increased nearly 30 % in recent years and thousands of Arizonans remain unsheltered.

A newly-elected governor can declare a state of emergency due to conditions of “disaster or extreme peril” threatening public safety and property. This legal framework supports rapid mobilization of resources to shelter individuals experiencing homelessness. Under emergency powers, the governor has complete authority over state agencies, police-like powers, and authority to direct personnel, equipment, and facilities to restore health and safety in the affected area.

This paper proposes an immediate, statewide emergency response that shelters 100 % of Arizona’s unsheltered homeless population within the administration’s first 30 days, based on a “tiered-care” shelter model that stratifies services by need (from long-term addiction to recent eviction).

Such a policy would reduce health-care, police, incarceration, and emergency service utilization among the homeless population—an approach proven to generate tens of thousands of dollars in savings per person annually.

The result: a net reduction in government and nonprofit expenditures currently nearing \$1 billion+ per year, and significant improvements in public order, human dignity, and public safety.

I. The Current Homeless System in Arizona

1.1 Spending Levels and Structure

- About \$933 million to \$1.1 billion per year is spent on services, shelter, treatment, and support programs for Arizona’s homeless population.

- This includes federal, state, and local sources, much of it flowing through roughly 167 nonprofit and public entities, forming a large, loosely coordinated service system.
- Average spending per unhoused individual can reach \$44,000+ annually, reflecting heavy reliance on emergency health care, crisis shelters, and policing.

1.2 System Performance

- Despite massive funding, the unsheltered population has continued to grow, including a nearly tripled unsheltered population since 2014 and record high counts in 2023.
- The lack of coordination and excess fragmentation between agencies and providers is a recurrent finding of policy reviews.

1.3 The Case for Emergency Action

Homelessness now meets statutory criteria for a statewide emergency: widespread danger to public safety and health beyond the capacity of local governments alone.

By treating homelessness as an emergency rather than a slow-burn social issue, the state can cut through bureaucratic inertia and implement systemic transformation rapidly.

II. Constitutional and Legal Powers of the Arizona Governor

2.1 Authority to Declare a State of Emergency

The governor may declare a state of emergency if “conditions of disaster or extreme peril to the safety of persons or property” exist and exceed the control of local jurisdictions.

Public-health emergencies, natural disasters, riots, and other widespread social harms fall under this authority.

2.2 Scope of Emergency Powers

Once a state of emergency is proclaimed:

- The governor holds complete authority over all state agencies and may exercise statewide police power as permitted by state law.
- The governor may direct state resources, personnel, equipment, and facilities to prevent or alleviate actual or threatened damage and restore health and safety.
- The governor may coordinate state aid to counties and municipalities on shelter, health care, and recovery.

This framework enables an immediate, coordinated emergency initiative to rapidly expand shelter capacity and social-service provision.

2.3 Time Limitations and Legislative Oversight

Arizona law and recent legislative proposals restrict unilateral emergency powers to roughly 30 days, after which they must be extended by the Legislature (except certain emergencies like war, fire, or flood).

Therefore, the plan proposed must be operationalized within the first month—and structured for continuation through legislative cooperation or conversion to permanent policy.

III. Proposed Policy: Emergency Tiered-Care Shelter Continuum

To acknowledge the full spectrum of needs—from untreated addiction to sudden eviction—Arizona should establish a multilevel system:

3.1 Emergency Stabilization Sites (0-30 Days)

Rapid deployment of large-scale emergency shelter facilities—using fairgrounds, unused government sites, modular units, and hotel partnerships.

Services:

- Basic needs (food, sanitation, temporary shelter)
- Rapid case screening (medical, addiction, family, economic)

3.2 Tier-1 Transitional Care (High-Need Individuals)

Target groups: severe mental illness, chronic addiction, long-term homelessness.

Services:

- Clinical supervision, psychiatric care, detox, long-term residential treatment
- Permanent supportive housing pipeline

3.3 Tier-2 Step-Up Programs (Mid-Need Individuals)

Target groups: job loss, short-term financial hardship, minor criminal justice involvement.

Services:

- Workforce reintegration, short-term housing assistance
- Case management, legal aid, and healthcare

3.4 Tier-3 Rapid-Rehousing and Family Stabilization

Target groups: evicted families, single mothers, seniors, and people who recently lost housing.

Services:

- Temporary housing stipends, rental mediation, emergency child-care assistance
- Streamlined path back to housing security

3.5 Unified Service Management System

The state should centralize funding control over all providers—governmental or nonprofit—during the emergency period.

This structure replaces the current fragmented funding framework with a single, emergency directorate to avoid duplication and inefficiency.

IV. Implementation Timeline (First 30 Days)

1. Day 0–3:

- Governor declares a state of emergency citing health and public-safety peril.
- Executive order mobilizes all state agencies, National Guard logistics, and temporary procurement.

2. Day 4–14:

- Emergency stabilization shelters open statewide.
- Intake and triage begin using assessment tools to assign individuals to tiers.

3. Day 15–30:

- Large-scale relocation to tiered-care facilities and housing solutions.
- State and nonprofit service contracts restructured to align with emergency mission metrics, not grant-driven metrics.

V. Cost Savings and Fiscal Impact

5.1 Current Spending Baseline

Government and nonprofit spending combined exceeds \$933 million to \$1.1 billion annually.

Your provided metrics—\$300 million in taxpayer burden and \$600 million in NGO market spending—fit within this documented range.

5.2 Evidence of Savings From Housing and Service Integration

Research analyzing homeless individuals with chronic mental illness found:

- Annual costs while homeless average about \$73,000 per person, driven mainly by health-care and criminal-justice expenses.
- Permanent supportive housing cuts costs to about \$52,000 per person, saving around \$21,000 annually per individual—a nearly 30 % reduction.

Other analyses of housing-first-like models find savings from reduced jail time, emergency service use, and emergency-room visits.

5.3 Macro-Level Savings Projection

Assuming the state shelters and supports all unsheltered residents under optimized emergency-care systems:

- A 20–30 % system efficiency gain could translate to \$200 million–\$300 million in statewide savings annually when scaled to current spending levels.
- Additional benefits include reduced policing, lower ER usage, improved quality of life, and increased employment or reintegration—long-term budget savings beyond direct program costs.

The combined effect is a restructuring of the current “maintenance” spending model into a results-driven investment model.

Conclusion

Declaring a statewide emergency to shelter all unsheltered residents in the first 30 days of a new administration is both legally viable under Arizona’s constitutional and statutory emergency powers and fiscally responsible.

Given that Arizona currently spends close to or over \$1 billion per year without solving homelessness, a decisive emergency action that restructures resource allocation—and deploys all state capacity—is necessary not only for

humanitarian reasons but also for long-term fiscal sustainability.

Key Outcomes if Implemented:

- Rapid humanitarian stabilization and safety restoration.
- Permanent improvements in both economic efficiency and service outcomes.
- Tangible reduction in taxpayer liability and nonprofit inefficiency.
- Strong demonstration of leadership from a new governor focused on problem-solving rather than institutional inertia.

