

# Seattle's Homelessness System

## Constraints and Reforms During the Pandemic

Shelter, Outreach & Housing and Why  
Visible Homelessness Has Worsened  
during COVID



**Councilmember Andrew J. Lewis**





## Letter from Councilmember Andrew J. Lewis

As we near the six-year anniversary of our state of emergency on homelessness we can all agree on one thing. The homelessness crisis, within Seattle and beyond, has become considerably worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. On September 6th, 2021, I requested an analysis from City Council Central Staff to assess the impact of COVID-era constraints and reforms on our homelessness housing continuum system, including shelter, social housing, and outreach services under City contract. This is not meant to be a fully comprehensive report, but a starting place to guide strategy around homelessness investments in the 2022 budget and provide some analysis of how our housing continuum can continue to adapt to a climate dominated by COVID and its variants. This report can also serve as an initial assessment of why the COVID environment has led to a dramatic increase of visible homelessness, and how we can make investments in the 2022 budget to reverse those trends.

The COVID impact to our shelter system has been particularly devastating, resulting in a dramatic increase of displacement and correlating to more people using public camping as their primary form of shelter. Council investments to scale emergency shelter have been slow to be implemented, exacerbating a climate of scarcity.

Additionally, this report provides an initial analysis of the Homeless Outreach and Provider Ecosystem (HOPE) Team, a Council created replacement for the Navigation Team, which commenced operations toward the end of 2020. It is notable that with either iteration of these teams, the underlying factor most determinative of their success in moving people inside is access to desirable shelter referrals. The data does not suggest the transition in teams materially impacted the ability of the City to make shelter referrals when available. As alluded to above, shelter supply remains the largest bottleneck to effectively move people

“

**This report can also serve as an initial assessment of why the COVID environment has led to a dramatic increase of visible homelessness, and how we can make investments in the 2022 budget to reverse those trends.**

“

**Council investments to scale emergency shelter have been slow to be implemented, exacerbating a climate of scarcity.**

inside, rather than other factors like service resistance.

COVID-era housing acquisition for people exiting homelessness has been dramatic. While few of these units are currently operational, and therefore not yet registering any visible results, the perfect storm of state, federal, county, and city investments has led to an unprecedented opportunity to acquire new housing assets. This report, notably, does not include JumpStart housing investments which will likely grow the supply of social housing even more dramatically. While more needs to be done to reach the regional metrics on social housing supply necessary to meet the scale of the crisis, these housing numbers during the pandemic represent a very strong start.

I cannot thank enough my policy lead Jacob Thorpe for his work assembling this report, as well as Central Staff analysts Jeff Simms and Traci Ratzliff for meticulously tracking down this critical data. I hope this report will help heighten and focus public attention toward addressing the specific issues we need to solve for to address our unprecedented crisis of homelessness. I look forward to working to addressing these bottlenecks in our 2022 budget negotiations.

Sincerely,



Councilmember Andrew Lewis





# Our Shelter System Under COVID

Starting in the spring of 2020, City shelter evolved considerably to become less-congregate. This process increased shelter quality but dramatically reduced supply. City-funded permanent shelter capacity (i.e., not temporary or one-time funded beds) has decreased since the end of 2019 and will not return to pre-pandemic levels until new shelter funded in the 2021 Budget and the Seattle Rescue Plan become operational. Some of those new investments are expected to become operational by the end of 2021. Several investments as of yet have no timeline to become operational.

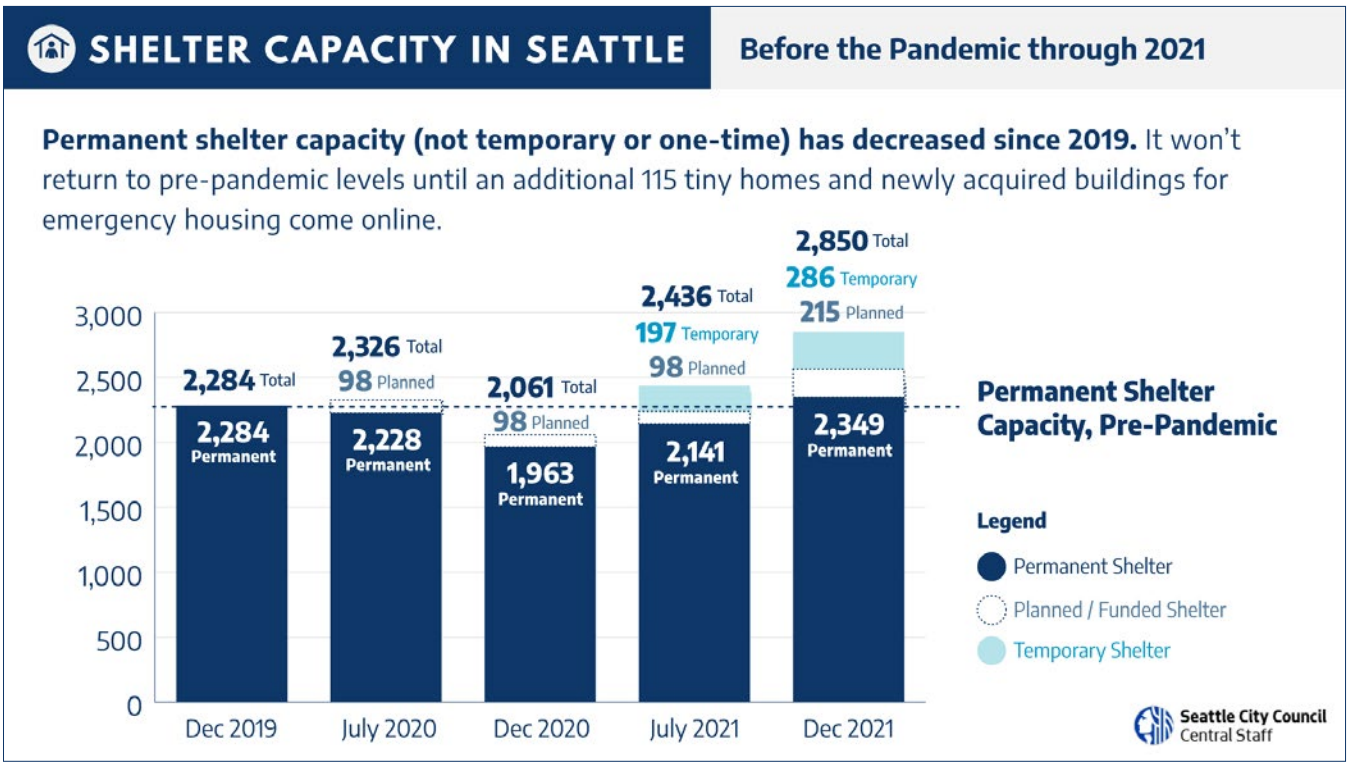


Chart 1 - Changes in City-Funded Shelter Capacity from 2019-2021

Prior to the COVID pandemic, the City funded a total shelter capacity of 2,284 units (see Chart 1) and anticipated an additional 80 tiny home beds funded by the Council in the 2020 Adopted Budget would come online over the course of the year. As a result, the City Council estimated that 2,364 permanent shelter beds would be available in 2020.

The pandemic required reductions in shelter capacity to increase social distancing in shelter programs. By the end of 2020, rather than capacity expanding by an estimated 80 units, it contracted by 223, a shift of 303 units.

The 2021 Adopted Budget included \$18 million of Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) COVID funds to pilot the use of hotels for shelter. Those funds led to the creation of 197 temporary shelter spaces at the King's Inn and Executive Hotel Pacific by April 2021. Combined with the reopening of some shelter beds and the expansion the Council had funded for 2020, total capacity reached 2,436 beds by July 2021, an increase of 152 beds compared to the end of 2019 (see Chart 1). However, permanent shelter capacity remained 45 units below the capacity at the end of 2019. During this period, the WHEEL-operated shelter at First Presbyterian Church was converted from basic to enhanced shelter beds, and the shelter in the City Hall lobby was moved to a location in the SODO neighborhood and converted to non-congregate enhanced shelter.

A contract with the Public Defender Association to operate JustCARE in the Downtown core, particularly serving City Hall Park, added to the temporary shelter capacity in the fall of 2021. This brought temporary shelter capacity to a total of 286 beds, for a total of 2,850 beds for the last quarter of 2021. However, 197 temporary hotel shelter beds at the King's Inn and Executive Hotel Pacific will begin to phase-out of operation early in 2022.

An additional 117 tiny home village beds will become operational by the end of 2021. Other acquisitions, such as the new shelter operated by Africatown Land Trust in The Community Home at Keiro, will add permanent shelter capacity for the City, as well, bringing permanent shelter capacity to 2,564. Until these beds become operational, permanent shelter capacity will remain below the City's shelter levels at the end of 2019 (dotted blue line in Chart 1).



## Navigation Team and HOPE Team

At the start of 2019, the Human Services Department (HSD) began collecting and reporting quarterly data on the Navigation Team, which has since been replaced by the Homelessness Outreach and Provider Ecosystem (HOPE Team). The last Central Staff memo on these reports was prepared for the Select Committee on Homelessness Strategies and Investments meeting on February 26th, 2020. Due to the replacement of the Navigation Team, HSD did not provide data on these activities for several months. On August 16, 2021, HSD provided its first full report on the HOPE Team in response to Council Budget Action HOM-020-A-001.

Among other data, HSD continues to report on the number of referrals to shelter (i.e., when an unsheltered individual



“**Success in moving residents of unsanctioned encampments into shelter is tied most significantly to the availability of suitable shelter spaces, not the threat of encampment removal.**”

accepts a referral to a shelter bed) and the rate that households referred to a shelter spend the night at that shelter. HSD no longer collects data on the number of contacts made by homelessness outreach providers and the HOPE Team. That information has been replaced by “shelter recommendations”, which reflect requests from a contracted homelessness outreach agency to make a shelter bed available after the outreach agency determined there is an appropriate match between the individual experiencing homelessness and the type of shelter beds that were available.

From April to June 2020, the Navigation Team achieved its highest rate of shelter referrals and shelter arrivals since data collection began. This peak occurred following the creation of 98 new shelter beds

and a cessation of encampment removals due to CDC guidance that encampment removals could increase the spread of COVID (see solid vertical red line in Chart 2). As the expanded shelter beds were filled, the rates that unsheltered individuals accepted offers of shelter and arrived at those shelter locations returned to previous levels, despite the continued halt in encampment removals. These results suggest that success in moving residents of unsanctioned

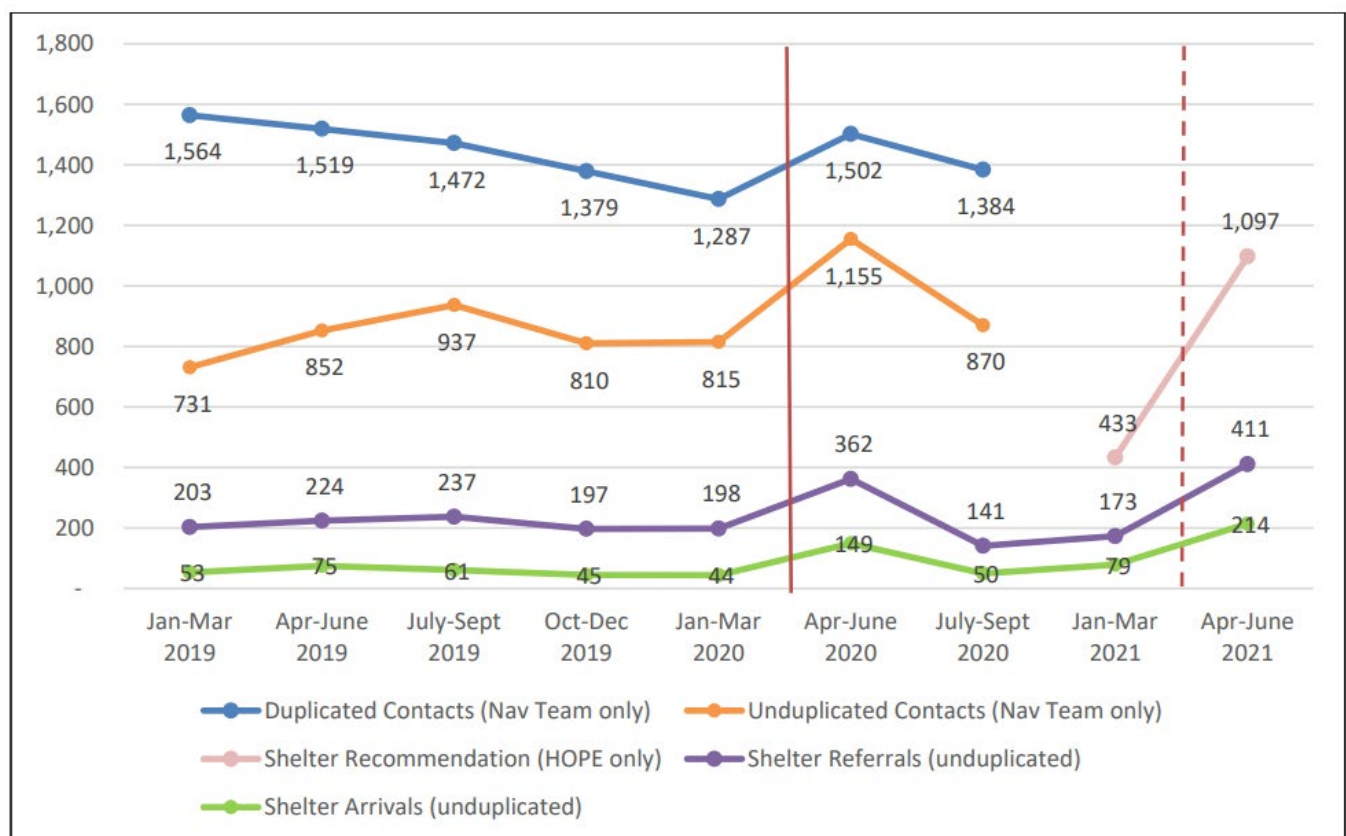



Chart 2 - Trends in Outreach and Service Connections by the Navigation Team and HOPE Team

encampments into shelter is tied most significantly to the availability of suitable shelter spaces, not the threat of encampment removal.

Similarly, the HOPE Team demonstrated a substantial increase in the number of shelter recommendations, shelter referrals, and shelter arrivals from April to June 2021 after a large expansion of shelter beds. The total number of shelter referrals and arrivals from April to June 2021 were 411 and 214, respectively. These are the highest numbers reported since data collection began and followed the opening of 197 temporary hotel shelter beds and the conversion of basic shelter locations to create 278 enhanced shelter beds (denoted in Chart 2 with a dotted vertical red line). As noted with the success of the Navigation Team in the spring of 2020, the scale of shelter expansion from February through April of 2021 far exceeded any other period during data collection and indicates a correlation between shelter expansion and the acceptance of shelter offers by people in unsanctioned encampments.

It is notable that both quarters of HOPE Team data indicate that there are more than 2.5 times as many requests for access to shelter than can be accommodated. The practice of the Navigation Team reporting its total number of contacts made during a quarter did not as clearly reflect the level of interest in available shelter beds.

It is not possible at this time to determine if the replacement of the Navigation Team with the HOPE Team had an impact on the rates that unsheltered individuals move into shelter or housing. The Navigation Team metric of contacts and the HOPE Team metric of shelter recommendations do not capture the same data. Although several metrics reflect improved outcomes with the HOPE Team compared to historical Navigation Team averages, it is not possible to factor out the confounding effect of shelter expansions, and, as noted above, both the Navigation Team and HOPE Team demonstrated significant improvements in effectiveness that correlate with expansions of shelter.



**There are more than 2.5 times as many requests for access to shelter than can be accommodated**

The Council authorized additional spending on emergency shelter and outreach on June 21, 2021, through Ordinance 126371. These investments include \$7.5 million to support a King County request for proposals to operate a combined outreach and shelter program, similar to a model implemented by JustCARE, and \$900,000 to operate additional shelter options, including for individuals residing in recreational vehicles. These investments are not yet operational and are unlikely to provide further data for analysis for several months. In addition, The Council appropriated \$9 million for non-congregate shelter in Ordinance 126298, which was amended by Ordinance 126375. An estimated \$5.5 million of these funds has been used to expand hotel sheltering as part of the JustCARE program, but those beds were not operational until the second half of 2021.

## Unprecedented Expansion of Social Housing

The COVID-era has coincided with significant investments in social housing in the City of Seattle. By building regional partnerships, and leveraging significant State and Federal dollars, the next three years will see a large increase in new housing opportunities for people exiting homelessness.

In 2020, the Office of Housing dedicated \$56 million of Housing Levy dollars toward a permanent supportive housing (PSH) pilot program, aimed at selecting six new projects for a total of 588 units. This City investment was built upon significantly in the 2021 Adopted City Budget, as well as through the \$28.5 million of funding from the federal American Rescue Plan authorized in 2021, which funded the acquisition of 165 units of housing that will be opened by the end of 2021. Additionally, 868 housing units will be coming online as the result of notice of funding availability (NOFA) awards for Office of Housing dollars from previous years. In total, this represents 1,621 new housing units funded from pairings of City, State, and Federal sources.

Additionally, a new King County program called Health Through Housing aims to acquire up to 1,155 new units County-wide. To date, 402 units have been acquired in Seattle and are slated to open in 2021 and 2022.

In the aggregate, Seattle is expected to add 2,023 new units of homeless housing units by 2023, a dramatic 47% increase in acquisition since 2019.

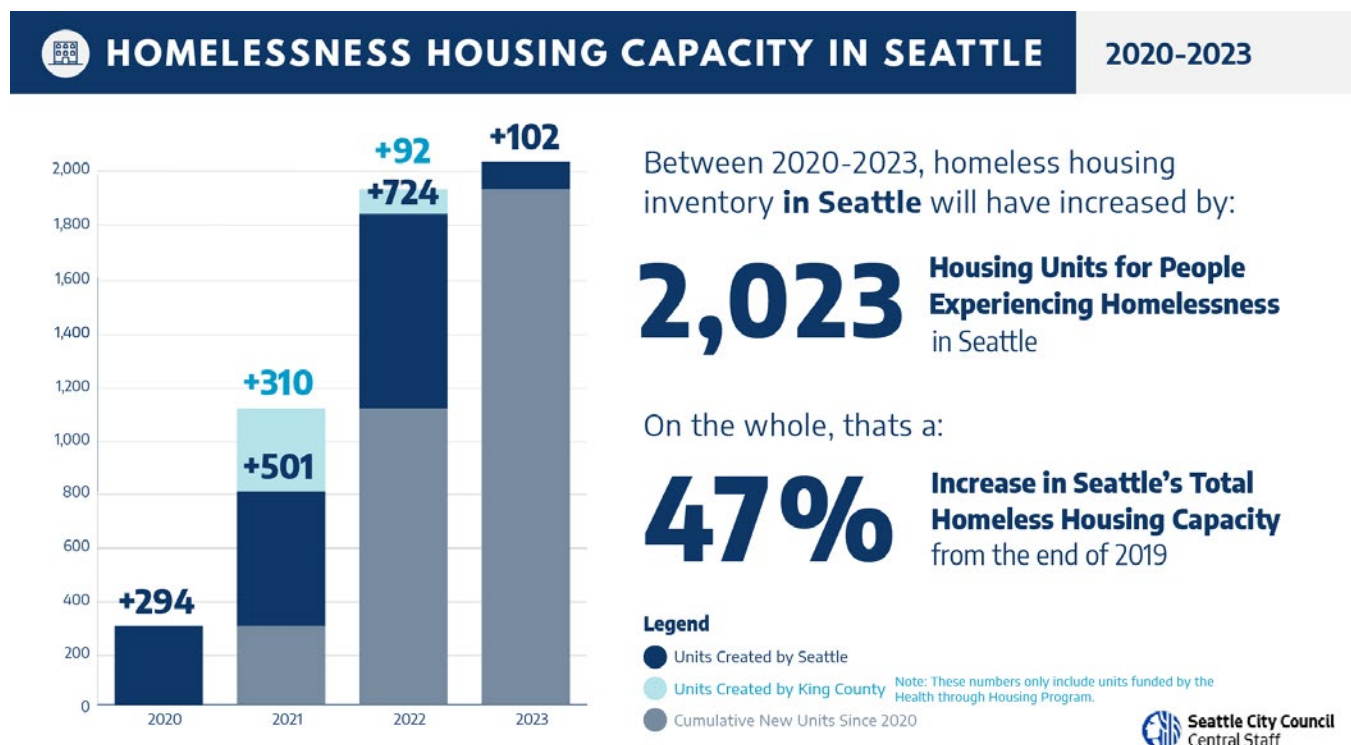


Chart 3 - Homelessness Housing Capacity in Seattle, 2020-2023





## Next Steps & Recommendations from Councilmember Lewis

As the City Council enters deliberations for the 2022 budget there are lessons to be gleaned from this assessment of COVID-era homelessness trends and policies. First, access to well-resourced shelter and housing assets is the most outcome determinative factor for whether outreach is successful. And second, meaningful acquisition of supportive housing is possible in an environment with significant state and federal support. While anticipated shelter and housing resources coming online in fall of 2021 and winter of 2022 will make a big visible difference in addressing the homelessness crisis, the Council should also consider appropriating resources for mitigation strategies.

As the data from the Navigation Team, HOPE Team, and JustCARE shows, outreach regardless of the model and constitution of the team shows the most success when those teams have access to shelter referrals. In crafting the future of outreach, the Council should emphasize a person-centered strategy to build trust and rapport with people experiencing homelessness. Enforcement strategies should be developed separately and should not be co-mingled with outreach. It is evident based on the data comparison between the results of the Navigation Team and the HOPE Team that integrating an enforcement component into outreach does not have an impact on the rate of referral to shelter.

**“While anticipated shelter and housing resources coming online in fall of 2021 and winter of 2022 will make a big visible difference in addressing the homelessness crisis, the Council should also consider appropriating resources for mitigation strategies.**

**“Access to well-resourced shelter and housing assets is the most outcome determinative factor for whether outreach is successful.**

The results from the Navigation Team and HOPE Team have not demonstrated that the threat of an encampment removal or presence of police increase the likelihood an individual will move into shelter.

To that end, the City must work closely with the KCRHA to provide sufficient shelter and housing assets to empower outreach workers to move people experiencing homelessness inside. Significant anticipated social housing coming online in the first quarter of 2022 should allow for increased pass-through from shelter to housing, in turn allowing for more referrals from street to shelter.

While 2,023 new units of social housing by 2023 is outstanding and unprecedented in recent history, the 2022 budget should build on this momentum to increase that number still further. The Third Door Coalition, an alliance of small businesses and service providers, has called for a regional \$1.6 billion plan to build 6,500 units in 5 years. The initial success of COVID-era acquisition has shown achieving such an effort is possible. However, that success has also been due to unprecedented state and federal support for acquisition. Since these acquisition resources may be COVID-era anomalies, the Council should work to maximize access to them in the 2022 budget.

Finally, while we should hope for the best, the Council must also craft a homelessness strategies budget that plans for the worst. While timelines for housing and shelter currently promise significant new operational housing and shelter over the next 6 months, we know significant issues regarding provider capacity, siting, and development hurdles threaten potential delay. Short-term mitigation strategies should be considered in the event that anticipated asset openings are delayed. San Francisco, for example, developed a system of Safe Sleep Site encampments in designated areas providing hygiene facilities, case management, and privacy. Continuing medium-term hoteling strategies may be another strategy to mitigate the encampment crisis. The hotels leased by the City are currently expected to wind down in the first quarter of 2022.

While the homelessness crisis increased significantly during the COVID-era, and continues to be the biggest omnipresent challenge we face, there is cause for optimism that long delayed housing and shelter assets will finally open over the next few months. The Council must craft a budget this cycle that builds on those investments and empowers the new KCRHA to address the crisis on a regional level.

## Resources and Citations

### Data

- [Analysis of Homeless System Capacity and Reports, Seattle City Council Central Staff](#)
- [Initial Health Through Housing Implementation Plan 2022-2028, King County](#)

### Photos

- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidjlee/39969298465>
- <https://coleadteam.org/justcare/>
- <https://www.housingconsortium.org/2020/08/13/member-highlight-plymouths-bob-marcia-almquist-place/>