

St. Louis Homelessness

Understanding the Problem

January 2024

*Citizens for a Greater Downtown St. Louis
The Downtown Neighborhood Association
Downtown Economic Development Council
St. Louis Neighborhoods Alliance*

About the Organizations Sponsoring this Report:

Citizens for a Greater Downtown St. Louis:



**CITIZENS FOR A GREATER
DOWNTOWN ST. LOUIS**

The mission of Citizens for a Greater Downtown St. Louis is to mobilize residents, businesses, property owners, developers, and anyone with a passionate interest in downtown St. Louis to advocate for effective planning and action to make downtown the premier neighborhood in the St. Louis region to live, work, and play. We advocate for changes in governance, finances, policy, and strategy as needed to make downtown better.

Downtown Neighborhood Association



The St. Louis Downtown Neighborhood Association (DNA) is a grassroots non-profit membership organization for residents and small businesses that undertakes community building and organizing to connect people, create change, and positively impact the historic and economic nucleus of our city and region.

St. Louis Neighborhoods Alliance

The St. Louis Neighborhoods Alliance is a newly formed group of neighborhood leaders and volunteers who share information on issues affecting neighborhoods in the City of St. Louis and advocate on legislative and other issues where there are common interests.

St. Louis Downtown Economic Development Council

The Downtown Economic Development Council is a volunteer organization of representatives of Downtown businesses, residents, the hospitality industry, and office tenants who have long been involved in Downtown matters.

Understanding the Homelessness Problem in the City of St. Louis

Introduction

Addressing the needs of the homeless is especially significant for many neighborhoods in the City of St. Louis (“City”) since the City has become the *de facto* center of the region’s homeless population. City neighborhoods are generally highly accessible by public transit, home to a disproportionate number of agencies serving the homeless while providing conditions conducive to living on the streets. Major encampments are common, often disrupting surrounding properties and businesses. The images of encampments, panhandling, drug-dealing, vandalism, and violence related to the homeless are now closely associated with the City.

Recent proposals to improve the conditions for the homeless population in St. Louis are driven by compassion but are based on vague and sometimes misleading representations of the facts surrounding homelessness in our community. Effectively serving homeless people and reducing homelessness must begin with better data, information, and knowledge to inform strategies that will work. The purpose of this brief paper is to help build a better understanding of the size (and trends) of St. Louis’ homeless population and the services and facilities that have been available to serve that population. A commonly accepted understanding of the problem is a necessary foundation upon which to build effective solutions. That may require abandoning some widely held beliefs that have emerged about the “homeless problem” in recent years.

While this paper strongly challenges some of the assumptions that led to the proposed “Unhoused Bill of Rights”, it does not suggest that the City should abandon its responsibility to its homeless citizens. Rather, it is an appeal to better serve those citizens by creating systems that reduce homelessness, rather than inviting more of it. Solutions must be driven by compassion, but also by good information, evidence of strategies that work, and a recognition that the City of St. Louis needs regional partners to succeed.

Background

In the early 1970’s homelessness became a significant public policy issue for the first time since the Great Depression. At the time, policy makers assumed homelessness was a transient issue that would abate with an improving economy while being generally addressed by churches and faith-based organizations using emergency shelter. However, by the 1980’s, it became apparent that homelessness would be a more persistent problem in the US.

The City of St. Louis did not substantively engage in efforts to address homelessness until a lawsuit was filed in 1985 by Legal Services of Eastern Missouri in a case called *Graham vs. Schoemehl*. This

resulted in a consent judgment wherein the City agreed to spend at least \$310,000 annually to provide municipal services including 1) “a reception center, transportation services, a day center for women, children and families, and transition services”; 2) at least 200 emergency shelter beds; 3) 100 additional units of permanent housing; and, 4) cold weather shelter.

Around that time, governments and homeless service providers started to experiment with transitional housing, in which homeless persons transitioned from homeless status into readiness for permanent housing after being provided with support services addressing mental health issues, substance abuse, etc. By 2004, as homelessness continued to grow, the City had gradually increased its level of shelter, transitional housing, and permanent housing for the homeless to the levels summarized in Chart 2 below. However, over the decade prior to 2004, it had become increasingly clear that evidence did not support either emergency shelter or transitional housing as effective means to end homelessness for a large portion of those assisted.

Instead, by 2004, evidence was building that the best practice intervention for those experiencing homelessness was direct placement into permanent housing, after which those persons now housed would receive support services to keep them housed and eventually break the cycle of homelessness. Under the direction of the federal government, this Housing First model was adopted as the national best practice for ending homelessness. To be eligible for continued federal homeless funding counties were required to put in place, by 2005, a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness. That requirement resulted in the St. Louis City/County 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness. The 10-year Plan led to the dramatic expansion of permanent housing beds/units discussed later in this brief.

The City of St. Louis does not currently publish comprehensive information about the homeless population and availability of resources, including the size and characteristics of the homeless population, the available City and regional services/resources, and the changes to the system over time. The City published three major documents in seven years, a 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness in 2005, an update to the 10-year plan in 2010, and another update in 2012 (the Moving Forward plan), which are sources for some of the data in this brief.¹

However, follow-up documents have not been published that describe how the system works, or outcomes of the policies and investments to address homelessness. In fact, a review of the City’s Homeless Services documents page: [Homeless Service Documents \(stlouis-mo.gov\)](http://stlouis-mo.gov), provides almost no information to inform policy makers or citizens, including information related to the origin of homeless individuals in the City.

The dearth of commonly accepted and reliable data leads to false assumptions and misleading conclusions, some of which were prominently in evidence during the two hearings held in late 2023 on the bills comprising the “Unhoused Bill of Rights” before the Housing, Urban Development and Zoning Committee of the Board of Aldermen. As part of their advocacy for Board Bills 126, 127, and 128, the aldermanic sponsors made several claims including:

- homelessness in the City has increased by 20% in the last two years.
- no shelters have opened in the past 15 years in large part because of the neighborhood approval process known as plat and petition.
- four shelters have closed in St. Louis since 2013.

¹ See 1) [EXECUTIVE SUMMARY \(stlouis-mo.gov\)](http://stlouis-mo.gov), 2) [Progress Report on 10 Year Plan Draft Feb. 8, 2011 \(stlouis-mo.gov\)](http://stlouis-mo.gov), and 3) [Moving-Forward-2nd-Edition-2012.pdf \(stlouis-mo.gov\)](http://stlouis-mo.gov)

These assertions, which in large part form the basis for the most dramatic policy proposals contained in the proposed board bills, suggest that the shelter bed count has fallen at the same time as the homeless population has skyrocketed, leaving the system in crisis, and demanding immediate and hastily considered action. A more careful review of the data does not support this conclusion or any of the underlying assertions. However, in the absence of proper context provided by easily sourced data, these statements can be persuasive and ultimately lead to policies that not only fail to solve the problem of homelessness but may make it worse and have secondary impacts on the health of City neighborhoods.

To help ensure that the homeless policies the City adopts are effective, this document sets forth some essential information that should be a foundation for a meaningful policy discussion of solutions. All the data presented in this document come from publicly available sources. Sources are noted throughout. The following sections describe conclusions that can be readily drawn from this information.

Defining the Problem

There Has Not Been a Dramatic Increase in the Unhoused Population Over Time in the City of St. Louis

Based on the 2023 Point in Time (“PIT”) Counts² in January of 2023 (see Chart 1 below), there were 1,252 unhoused people in the City. Of that number, 337 were in transitional housing, 809 were in emergency shelter, and 106 were unsheltered (which is the subset of the “unhoused” not supported by shelter or transitional housing). The unhoused population has stayed relatively consistent during the previous 8 years, mostly ranging between 1,000 and 1,300 persons, with likely variations caused by factors like the COVID pandemic (which would have most impacted the 2021 and 2022 January PIT Counts). The current count of 1,252 unhoused persons is almost identical to the figures for 2016 and 2020.³ Notably, the number of unhoused persons in the City hasn’t changed significantly since 2010 and is now nearly 16% smaller than in 2005 (see Chart 2 below).

The Number of Emergency Shelter Beds Has Not Declined

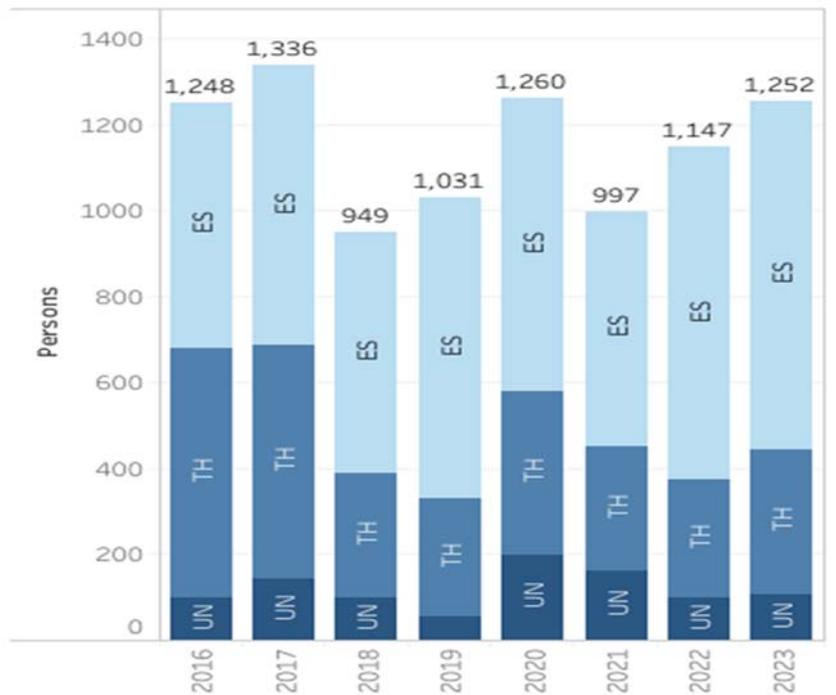
The assertion has been widely made that there has been a significant decrease in homeless shelter beds, partly in response to the 2017 closure of the large (and illegal) shelter operated in Downtown by the New Life Evangelistic Center. Data show that the opposite is true. According to the Missouri Homeless Management Information System (“HMIS”), there are significantly more year-round homeless shelter beds in the City now than there were in 2016 (see Chart 3 below). As Chart 2 shows, there are more emergency shelter beds in the City of St. Louis than there have been at any

² The Point-in-Time (PIT) count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires that each Continuum of Care (CoC) conduct an annual count of people experiencing homelessness who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night.

³ PIT Count data is available from the CoC webpage, [Data - St. Louis Continuum of Care \(cocstl.org\)](https://cocstl.org), and the Missouri PIT Count Dashboard: [MO PIT Dashboard — Institute for Community Alliances \(icalliances.org\)](https://icalliances.org)

time since 2005. These accommodations are of significantly better quality than what NLEC provided prior to its closure.

Chart 1 – Unhoused Persons in City by Year (Not Including Those in Long Term Housing)



Source: St. Louis Continuum of Care (cocstl.org)

There has Been a Dramatic Expansion of City Beds/Units for the Homeless

Following the adoption of the Housing First model in 2005, in addition to expanding and improving its emergency shelter bed supply, the City has dramatically expanded its supply of all types of housing available to the unhoused. Chart 4, from the State’s HMIS provider, shows that from 2016 to 2023, the City expanded the total number of beds/units available to the homeless by over 1,000 beds/units, from 2,841 to 3,856.

As shown on Chart 2 below, the total increase in the number of beds/units between 2005 and 2023 was over 1,500 units (from 2,310 to 3,856). And, of these additional 1,500 beds/units, almost all of them were a form of long term “Housing”, whether Rapid Re-Housing (“RR”) units, Permanent Supportive Housing (“PSH”) units, or Other Permanent Housing (“OPH”) units.⁴

⁴ The term “Housing” is used in this paper to describe the following classifications of housing types:

- **Emergency Shelters (ES)** - ES provides support services and short-term stabilization for individuals and families before finding appropriate housing that meets their long-term needs.

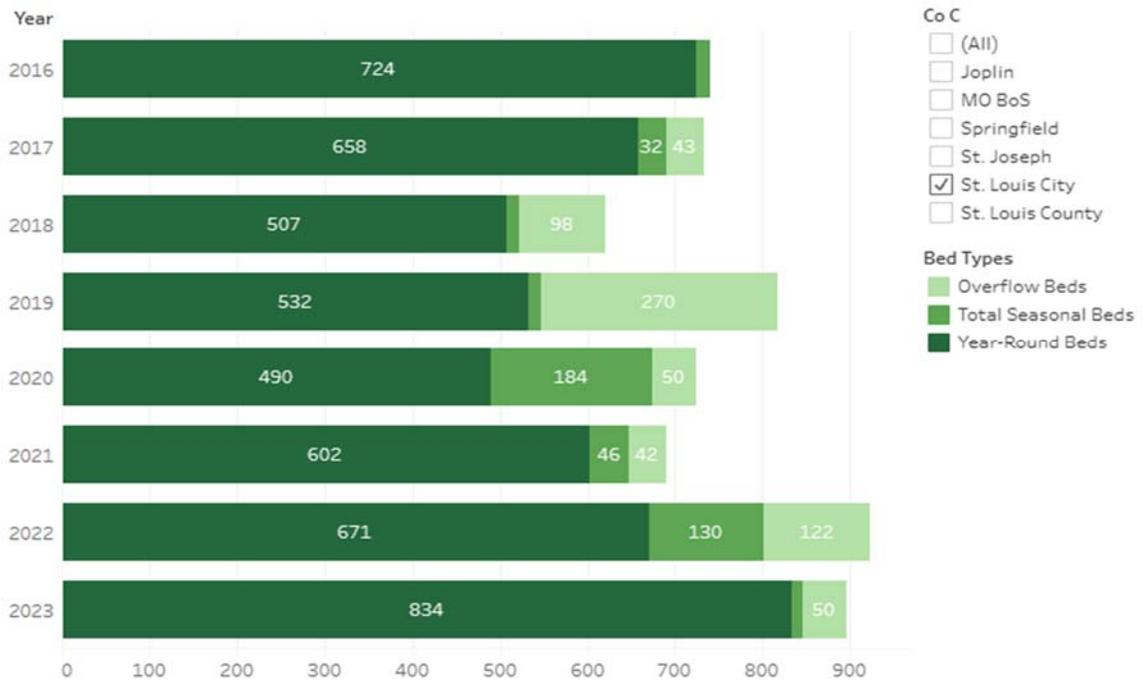
Chart 2 – Point in Time Data on City Unhoused Population and Beds/Units for the Unhoused

Unhoused Population per PIT Counts	2005	2010	2016	2019	2023
"Unhoused" Population	1,485	1,305	1,248	1,031	1,252
Formerly "Unhoused" Pop. (in PSH, RR or OPH)	?	?	1,496	2,162	2,435
Total "Unhoused" or Formerly "Unhoused" Pop.	?	?	2,744	3,193	3,687
Available Beds/Units for the Unhoused					
Shelter / Transitional Housing Beds (The persons using these resources are considered to be "Unhoused")					
Emergency Shelter (Adjusted for NLEC)	781	630	740	818	896
Transitional Housing	779	811	705	371	376
Subtotal	1,560	1,441	1,445	1,189	1,272
Percentage Utilization of Beds	95%	91%	86%	87%	98%
Permanent / Semi-Permanent Units (The persons in these units are NO LONGER considered "Unhoused")					
Permanent Supportive Housing	750	1,231	1,396	1,940	1,797
Rapid Re-Housing	-	-	-	319	319
Other Permanent Housing	-	-	-	21	468
Subtotal	750	1,231	1,396	2,280	2,584
Total Beds / Unit	2,310	2,672	2,841	3,469	3,856
Percentage Utilization of Beds	?	?	97%	92%	96%

Source: Data sourced from Charts in this brief and 3 City reports (2005, 2010, 2012) referenced above

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- **Transitional Housing (TH)** - TH provides temporary residence, ranging from six to 24 months for people experiencing homelessness. Transitional shelters typically include supportive services to improve employability, to further help individuals obtain permanent housing as quickly as possible.
 - **Rapid Re-Housing (RRH)** - [RRH is a housing model](#) that is targeted at the medium acuity population ,that provides assistance to help individuals and/or families find a home of their own as quickly as possible. It is a housing first solution for non-chronic homelessness where individuals or families rent an apartment of their own and are provided temporary community support services which can include case management and time-limited financial assistance, with the goal to bring them quickly out of homelessness.
 - **Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)** - PSH is a program designed to provide housing and supportive services on a long-term basis to formerly chronically (or high acuity) homeless people. These are individuals who have a diagnosed disability and who have been continuously homeless for one year or more. PSH provides safe and stable housing environments with flexible and voluntary services.

Chart 3 – Emergency Shelter Bed Number and Composition



Source: Institute for Community Alliances (icalliances.org)

The City is Providing Far More Beds/Units Than its Regional Fair Share

The City is providing far more beds/units for the homeless than should be expected, given its population and demographics. The City contains only 10% of the total regional population and roughly 20% of the regional low-income population. But it contains more than half of the region’s total resources for the homeless, including almost 100% of the resources for the high-acuity population (also known as the chronically homeless).

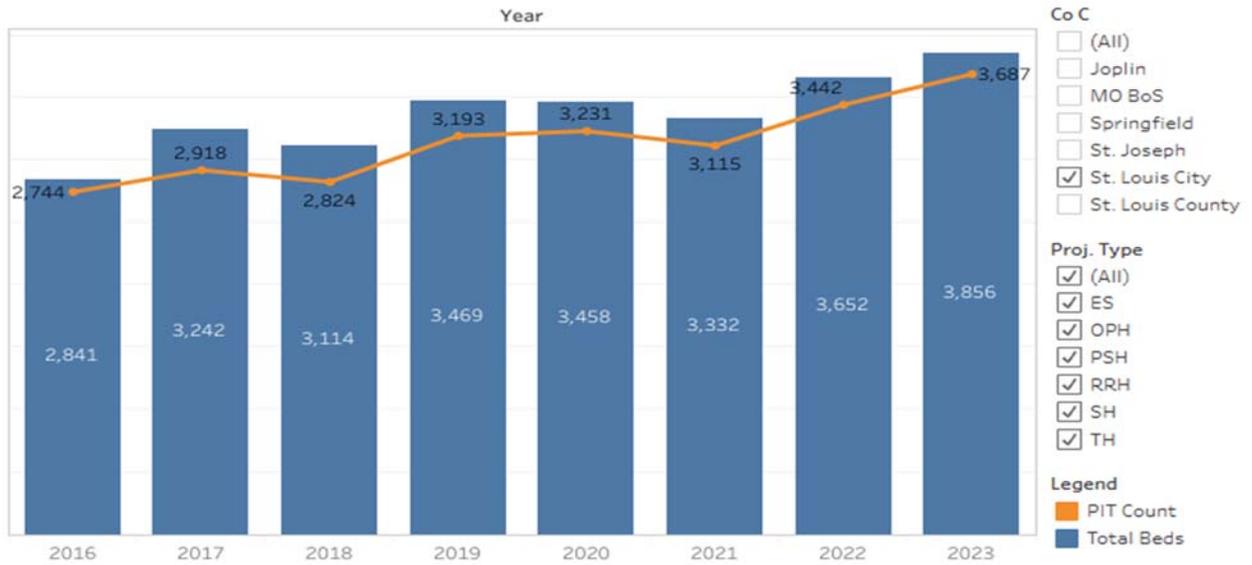
The City (see Chart 4 above) has 3,856 beds/units for the homeless for a county with less than 300,000 residents. St. Louis County (see Chart 5 below) currently provides 1,286 beds/units for a county with almost a million people (and more low-income residents than the City). On a per capita basis, the City provides over 10 times as many beds/units for the unhoused as St. Louis County.

The City Oversupplies Beds/Units Because the Surrounding Counties do not Provide Comparable Resources

The main reason the City needs to oversupply beds/units for the homeless, despite being one of the lowest resource counties in the region, is because the surrounding counties consistently export their homeless citizens to the City in police cruisers, ambulances, cabs, and private vehicles rather than provide adequate homeless services and housing for their most at-risk citizens. And, City government

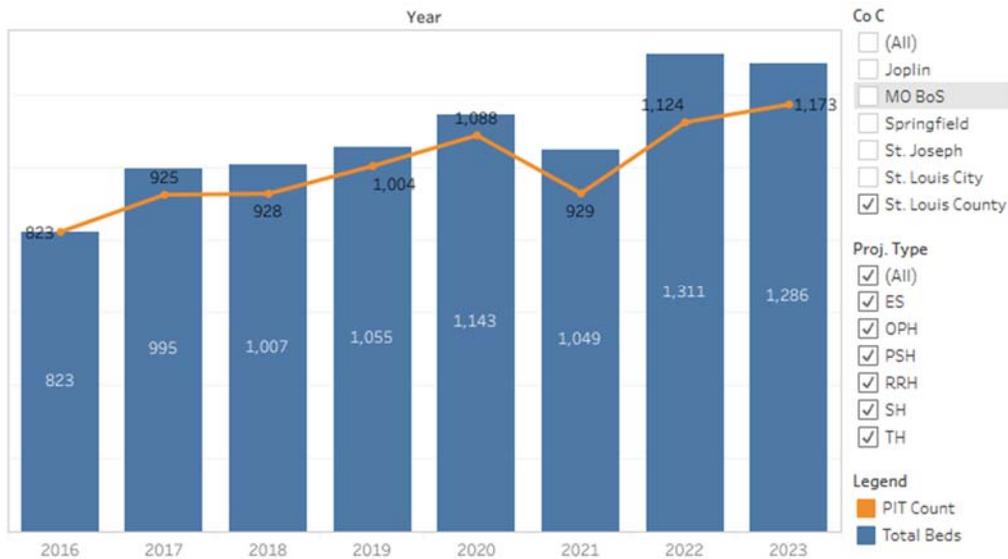
and service providers have tolerated and enabled this behavior, to the great detriment of the City and the unhoused.

Chart 4 – City of St. Louis Total Beds/Units & PIT Count



Source: Institute for Community Alliances (icalliances.org)

Chart 5 – St. Louis County Total Beds & PIT Count



Source: Institute for Community Alliances (icalliances.org)

Evidence of this regional dislocation of the homeless is not hard to find. A few examples:

- The Chief of Police of the City of Brentwood in 2016 described the situation in St. Louis County very well in the email shown in Figure 1. In it he describes how a police officer drove a homeless person from Brentwood to the New Life Evangelistic Center in Downtown St. Louis because “the County has not addressed this issue, and there are little, to no, resources in the County”.
- Proponents of the Unhoused Bill of Rights acknowledge that St. Louis County and surrounding counties are failing to provide adequate services to their homeless citizens and instead export them to the City⁵, yet they have made no known attempt to press neighboring counties to provide adequate services for the homeless.
- Executives with Federal agencies have confided that St. Louis County in years past has declined to apply for funding for homeless services made available to them, in part because it was politically unpalatable.

Figure 1 – Email Regarding Relocation of Homeless Person From St. Louis County

From: Dan Fitzgerald [mailto:dfitzgerald@brentwoodmo.org]
Sent: Monday, January 11, 2016 9:12 AM
To: Kirk Mills
Cc: Chris Thornton; bakande@brentwoodmo.org
Subject: Brentwood Police Officer

Mr. Mills,

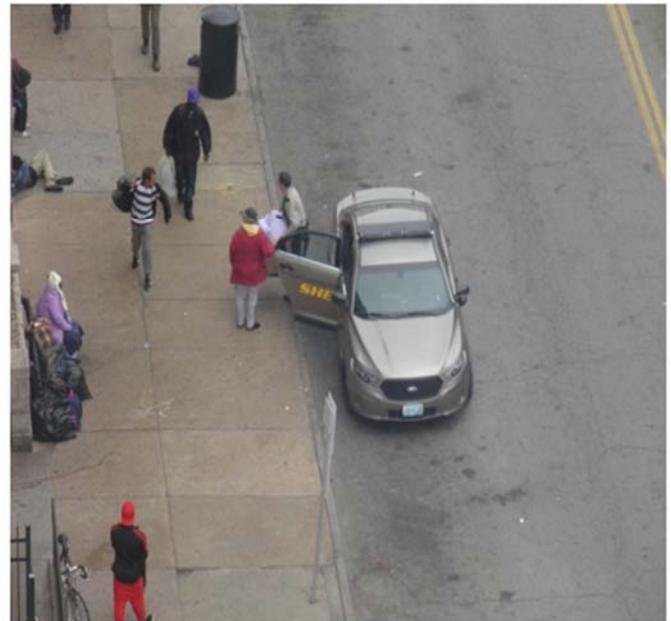
On Saturday afternoon, our officer spent two hours with the young lady in your picture, trying to find shelter for her. He called many agencies discussing her situation. Several referred him to NLEC. He called NLEC, and arranged placement for the woman. He drove her to the front door, walked in with her to ensure she was accepted, and made sure she was given something warm to drink and eat. The woman hugged our officer, and he returned to work. No fanfare; just serving the public.

No fanfare, until you decided to send e-mails to seven different people to opine on a situation you knew **nothing** about. Your e-mail was interpreted as a “dump-job” by our officer on Twitter, and we were consequently the focus of many uninformed insults.

We are proud of the steps taken by our officer, showing both compassion and patience. As you may, **or may not know, the homeless issue is becoming serious in St Louis County. The County has not addressed this issue, and there are little, to no, resources in the County.** Our officer did the best job he could do, with the resources he was given.

Dan

Dan Fitzgerald, Chief of Police
Brentwood Police Dept. 272 Hanley Industrial Court, Brentwood, MO
63144
Desk 314-963-8616



⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihlwLcpLuAs>.

There is a Pattern of Unhoused Migration into the City from Other Regions

A large percentage of the homeless people in the City are not originally residents of the City but come to the City after they have become homeless elsewhere. This is true mostly for the high acuity homeless, who are extremely mobile and migrate freely around the country, in contrast to the low and medium acuity persons, who tend to seek services closer to home.

One way to demonstrate the mobility of the homeless is to analyze the utilization rates of the shelter and housing resources the City has created. As shown in Chart 4 above, the City created over 1,000 units of Housing between 2016 and 2023 targeting the homeless. However, during that eight-year time, the total homeless population⁶ in the City identified by the PIT Counts grew by almost the same amount (from 2,744 to 3,687, a 35% increase), with the unhoused population changing annually in direct proportion to the number of beds/units created. This was during a time when the national population of the unhoused only grew by 6%⁷, and there is nothing about St. Louis, unlike some cities on the west coast experiencing affordable housing crises or cities that have declared themselves “sanctuary cities”, that would suggest the City’s homeless population outpaced the national increase by 600 percent. The only reasonable explanation for the surge in the population in the City living in long term Housing targeted at the homeless is that most of those people came to the City from other places, perhaps to take advantage of City resources.

This conclusion is supported by other significant data. In the City’s 2012 Moving Forward document⁸, information was provided on county of origin of the roughly 70 encampment residents living on the north riverfront:

- 38% were from the City
- 34% came from outstate Missouri
- Others came from eight different states

Also, in data included in the 2005 Plan to End Chronic Homelessness⁹, of the 1,861 chronically homeless people in both the City and St. Louis County, 401 individuals had a permanent address more than 100 miles from the City. And 390 were from St. Louis County. Statistics were not provided for homeless individuals from inside 100 miles that were not from the City or St. Louis County.

The available data strongly contradicts commonly held beliefs related to migration of the unhoused to the City. Why would homeless persons who are not from the St. Louis region come to the City to be homeless? Some possible reasons applying primarily to the very mobile high acuity population:

- St. Louis weather is favorable most of the year for people who want to live on the streets. And many of those in the high acuity population don’t stay in St. Louis during the bad weather months.

⁶ Defined to include the “unhoused” living in emergency shelter and transitional housing, or unsheltered, and those who are formerly unhoused but now living in long term Housing, defined to include Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Re-Housing, and Other Permanent Housing.

⁷ [State of Homelessness: 2023 Edition - endhomelessness.org](https://endhomelessness.org/state-of-homelessness-2023-edition/)

⁸ [Moving-Forward-2nd-Edition-2012.pdf \(stlouis-mo.gov\)](https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/files/assets/moving-forward-2nd-edition-2012.pdf)

⁹ [EXECUTIVE SUMMARY \(stlouis-mo.gov\)](https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/files/assets/executive-summary-2005.pdf)

- Many of the high acuity homeless don't come to St. Louis as a destination. It is just a location that is centrally located and accessible. It is a temporary place to stay for a while on their migration around the country. To the extent these people migrate into St. Louis but find a social service ecosystem that allows them to continue their lives on the streets, they often extend their stays.
- Other cities like Chicago and Memphis export their homeless citizens to St. Louis by giving them bus tickets, as does the Missouri Department of Corrections. St. Louis is known as a place where resources are freely available through generous private organizations, many of them faith-based.
- Increasingly, the City is viewed as a midwestern version of permissive cities like Portland and San Francisco, cities where you can live on the streets or in a park without getting hassled by the police and where compassionate churches/volunteer groups will provide food, tents, and other resources that enable a life on the streets.

Conclusion

Since 2005 the City of St. Louis has expended enormous resources, local and federal, to address the problem of homelessness, with the intention of effectively eliminating medium and high acuity homelessness for City residents. Over almost 20 years, the City created over 1,500 units of Housing for the unhoused population in furtherance of this goal. However, there has been no significant decrease in the population of the unhoused, though all the long-term Housing created is effectively full.

Decision-makers trying to achieve different and better outcomes in the future would be advised to consider the well-known principle of “policy resistance” wherein seemingly common-sense policies sometimes result in counter-intuitive outcomes and unintended consequences. For example, it is an accepted yet paradoxical phenomenon that expanding highways to address traffic congestion associated with urban sprawl often creates more severe congestion by inducing greater demand for highway travel including longer and more numerous trips. The “war on drugs” generated harsh prison sentences for those caught possessing drugs. Yet, drug use continued unabated and prison costs exploded as their populations filled up with criminals sent there for nonviolent drug crimes. This broke families apart and led to greater insecurity in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. These are examples of “fixes that fail” – despite devoting more resources to solve a problem, the worse the problem gets. This systems trap is the key phenomenon driving the behavior of the City’s homelessness system – the more resources/beds/units the City provides, the more homeless people are drawn to the City to use these resources/beds/units and increasing the City’s responsibility to provide for them.

As long as the City continues to provide ever greater resources to address the needs of the homeless, with no ability or willingness to restrict who can access these resources in the City, it will just keep importing people from elsewhere in the St. Louis region, outstate Missouri and other states to fill up every bed or unit created. The biggest victims of this policy failure will be the homeless residents of the City, people who lived in the City before they became homeless, who can't access the resources they need to escape homelessness because they are competing with an endless migration of homeless people from other places.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the City's homeless policy is not working and the City's ability to help its own homeless citizens has not substantially improved despite tens of millions of dollars invested. Current policies have not reduced homelessness or improved the lives of the City's homeless citizens.

Rather than trying to craft solutions that address the reasons that current City homeless policy is not working, the Unhoused Bill of Rights doubles down on the demonstrably flawed strategy of providing ever increasing City resources for homeless services. This is happening in part because of the absence of 1) any serious attempt to encourage surrounding counties to responsibly provide services to their own homeless citizens; and 2) the City's continuing policy to provide costly City services and Housing to non-City residents. The outcome of the Unhoused Bill of Rights, should it be enacted, is totally predictable; it will not reduce homelessness in the City nor effectively improve the lives of the homeless. It will likely have the opposite result.