NATIONAL LAW CENTER
ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

COVID-19 Statement

People without housing are especially vulnerable to poor health and communicable diseases, including COVID-19 - the coronavirus pandemic threatening the lives and health of people worldwide. Worse yet, unhoused people have limited options for safe, sanitary shelter, making an effective response to the deadly virus extremely difficult. To effectively address this public health crisis, we must implement the human rights to housing and healthcare.

People Experiencing Homelessness are Exceptionally Vulnerable

The Centers for Disease Control states that people with previously compromised immune systems, chronic health conditions such as diabetes or HIV, and people over age 60 are more at risk of coronavirus, as well as associated fatality. In the current homelessness population, all of those comorbidities are involved. Forty four percent of all individuals experiencing homelessness found themselves on the street after turning 50 years old, and life on the street amplifies the danger for them, and even those who are younger: researchers have also found that homelessness prematurely ages the body by 10 to 20 years beyond individuals chronological age and hinders physical capacity or financial flexibility to seek care in case of illness.

People living on the streets, in shelters, or in their cars are more vulnerable to an outbreak of highly communicable diseases like COVID-19. Without adequate, permanent and stable housing, people lack a restroom for frequent handwashing, laundry facilities, and personal hygiene. Homelessness itself threatens the immune system; sleep—if any—is cut short; nutrition is lacking; sanitation is scarce; health and dental care nonexistent or put off until too late for fear of medical bills that cannot be paid. Even those who are able to obtain treatment are often put back out on the streets before they are fully recovered, putting them at risk of recurrence or aggravation of their symptoms. People experiencing homelessness who have work (as many do) are often in low-wage jobs with no sick leave, putting them at risk of loss of income if they do become ill.

Students experiencing homelessness rely on schools for meals and shelter during the day, and most likely do not have access to laptops or wifi for remote learning. Homeless students attending universities may do not have alternative housing when their dorms close, or alternatives for meals when dining facilities close.

Because homelessness disparately affects people of color, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ populations, particularly LGBTQ youth, and these groups experience marginalization in other ways in our economic and health care systems, both the economic and health care aspects of this crisis will disparately impact them as well.

Forcing people experiencing homelessness into close, congregate facilities such as large scale shelters is a recipe for rapid spread of disease. The American Medical Association and American Public Health Association have both adopted official policy statements supporting the protection of the civil and human rights of individuals experiencing homelessness and opposition to laws and policies that criminalize individuals experiencing homelessness for carrying out life-

sustaining activities conducted in public spaces when there is no private space available. Both affirm that the best tool to resolve the public health concerns associated with unsheltered homelessness is housing.

Recommendations

1) **House people experiencing homelessness in hotels, motels, and/or RVs for the duration of the crisis.** The state of California and multiple cities within the state, Portland, OR, King County, WA and other cities have committed to this approach. This allows people experiencing homelessness access to adequate sanitation and to effectively maintain social distancing. This applies both to people experiencing homelessness who are showing no symptoms as a preventative measure as well as for medical respite housing while individuals are quarantined or recovering after diagnosis. Placement into such temporary housing should include provisions for people to bring their partners, pets, and possessions with them.

2) **Place a moratorium on sweeping encampments and seizing homeless people's tents and other temporary structures and stop enforcement of laws prohibiting resting and sheltering oneself in public space.** While encampments are not a long-term solution, preserving individuals' ability to safely and legally sleep in private tents instead of mass facilities would ensure people can more safely shelter in place, maintain social distancing, and reduce sleep deprivation. Enforcement of laws criminalizing self-sheltering in the absence of adequate alternatives is cruel and leads to incarceration in overcrowded jails where the risk of COVID-19 exposure is also high. Stopping sweeps can also help prevent scattering people and spreading infection. San Jose, CA was the first city in the nation to place a moratorium on sweeps, and other cities like Portland, OR have reduced sweeps activity.

3) **Increase access to hygiene and sanitation services for those living in unsheltered areas.** To stop the spread of COVID-19 exposure and infection, it is critical for unhoused people to have access to running water, clean toilets, and handwashing stations. This is particularly a concern as many previously publicly accessible facilities (restaurants, gyms, libraries, etc.) have now closed. Encampments should be provided with mobile toilets and sanitation stations and trash bins to further reduce harm, as LA Councilmember Mike Bonin has done in his district.

4) **Place a moratorium on vehicle ticketing, towing, and impoundment.** Without housing, many people seek shelter in their private vehicles where they can lock doors for safety and remain with their families, pets, and personal possessions. Moreover, RVs and similar vehicles offer amenities typically found in a permanent home, such as running water, showers, and toilets. Laws punishing sheltering in vehicles are the fastest growing criminalization policy in the nation, leaving many people at risk of expensive ticketing, arrest, and/or incarceration. In response to this risk, some cities like Los Angeles, CA and Portland, OR have temporarily halted or reduced vehicle ticketing, towing, and impoundment.

5) **Immediately and safely decrease the number of people incarcerated for laws criminalizing homelessness and other non-violent offenses.** Many homeless people are arrested and incarcerated for crimes of survival, yet they are unable to afford bond or to secure pre-trial release on their own recognizance. This results in homeless people being

locked into overcrowded jails where risk of COVID-19 exposure is high. Communities should not only reduce arrests of unhoused people, but urgently increase options for release from custody for bondable offenses.

6) **Schools must take students experiencing homelessness into account as they close down**. Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Act includes making equitable considerations for students experiencing homelessness to ensure they are able to continue learning. This could include making schools available during the day, providing meals that can be with students, ensuring access to computers and wifi for online learning, and other steps.

7) **Universities must also take students experiencing homelessness into account as they close.** Institutions of higher learning should ensure accommodations are made during coronavirus shut-downs for students experiencing homelessness who may not have alternative housing, including, but not limited to, keeping dorms open and accessible and providing for meals, and providing stipends for additional needs.

8) **Federal, state, and local surplus governmental property available for safe camping, parking and access to supplies and services.** Many governments have vacant land and buildings that can be used to safely shelter people in private, sanitary settings and/or to park their vehicles. These properties can also be used as a base for distribution of sanitation supplies, meals, and/or other needed goods and services to help unhoused people meet their basic human needs while preventing spread of COVID-19.

9) **Prevent new homelessness by immediately halting ALL eviction and foreclosure proceedings, put a moratorium on evictions, and ban the imposition of late fees on missed rental or mortgage payments during the crisis**. Private housing is the best place to practice social distancing - the single most important method for curbing the spread of COVID-19. A halt to all evictions is necessary to prevent homelessness, but also stop the need to fight evictions in a crowded courtroom. A ban on foreclosures is also necessary to help affected homeowners and ensure landlords with mortgages do not suffer as a result of delayed or foregone rent. The ban on missed payments is necessary to ensure a new homelessness crisis does not develop following the resumption of payments after the healthcare-specific crisis comes to an end. Additional low income housing recommendations here: https://nlihc.org/coronavirus-and-housing-homelessness.

10) **Ensure that any emergency cash relief measures designed to assist people with the economic impact of the Coronavirus crisis are also made available to and reach homeless people.** This includes unaccompanied homeless youth, and could take place through distribution through health/shelter outreach workers, at shelters, food pantries, public housing, social service sites, and other sites serving homeless and low income people. Outreach informing people experiencing homelessness of the availability of cash relief and locations to receive it is also essential.

It is in the public's best interest to address housing needs of our fellow Americans, as housing IS health. Housing provides the stability for a functioning immune system, the infrastructure for handwashing and sanitation, and the safety for rest, sleep, proper nutrition, and social distancing. Housing is the next step to mitigating COVID-19.