

**National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty Strategic Plan:
January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2022**

Vision

Our vision is for an end to homelessness in America. A home for every family and individual will be a right and not a privilege; a reality, not just a goal.

Mission

The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty is the only national advocacy organization dedicated solely to using the power of the law to end and prevent homelessness in America. With the support of a large network of pro bono lawyers, we use our legal expertise to help pass, implement and enforce laws addressing the immediate and long-term needs of those who are homeless or at risk. In partnership with state and local advocates, we work towards strengthening the social safety net through advocacy and advocacy training, public education, and impact litigation.

Values

The Law Center is founded on the belief that in a society that has enough for all, no one should have to go without the basic necessities of life. Everyone should have equal access to justice and opportunity. Specifically:

- We believe in the inherent value and dignity of all human beings.
- We understand that people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, youth, individuals with disabilities, low-income, and other vulnerable groups are disproportionately and uniquely impacted by homelessness.
- We believe that housing is a human right, as recognized by the [United Nations](#) and several countries around the world.
- We believe it is possible to end homelessness in the United States. We are committed to that goal as well as to reducing the harmful effects of homelessness on those who experience it until our ultimate goal is met.
- We strive to reflect the voices and experiences of homeless and at risk people in our work and to support their own advocacy.
- We believe that our advocacy is most powerful in collaboration with others, and we partner with pro bono attorneys and firms, other national and local organizations, grass roots advocates, and people who are homeless to amplify our capacity and leverage each contributor's unique ideas, skills, and resources.

Term

Four years, with a mid-term review after the first two years.

Background: The 2016 to 2018 plan

Major program priorities of the 2016-18 plan were countering the criminalization of homelessness, promoting housing rights, and protecting education (and other) rights for children and youth. Central to the plan was the development of a new [Housing Not Handcuffs](#) (“HNNH”) Campaign to fight the criminalization of homelessness and advocate for the right to housing. An additional goal was to create two networks to support these priorities: one focused on the HNNH

campaign and another, Project LEARN, focused on children’s rights. Over the past three years, the Law Center made important progress towards these goals.

HNH Campaign. Campaign goals set by the plan included preventing or striking down harmful laws and/or policies and promoting laws or policies advancing the right to housing. To date, the campaign has prevented or struck down over 60 harmful laws and/or policies, exceeding our target of 30, and successfully promoted laws and policies protecting housing rights in at least 16 communities. The HNH network now has almost 800 endorsing organizations, public officials and other individuals, and an active listserv with over 300 participants. We launched a new HNH Justice Network, focused on litigation, with 30 inaugural members.

As part of the campaign, we have also won substantial court victories, including:

- a major federal appellate victory in [Martin v. Boise](#), in which a federal appeals court ruled it is unconstitutional to “criminalize conduct that is an unavoidable consequence of being homeless—namely sitting, lying, or sleeping on the streets” when there are no other adequate alternatives for shelter; and
- a major victory in [Bloom v. San Diego](#), when a federal judge granted interim relief allowing disabled homeless people to live in their vehicles without fear of police harassment. In the case, we are fighting to stop the city from penalizing disabled homeless people who live in their cars with fines, impoundment, and jail. This is a growing issue as rising housing costs push more people to move into their cars, especially for people with disabilities who are on fixed incomes.

Finally, also as part of the campaign, we developed and launched an innovative new letter writing campaign, aimed at over 240 cities, to capitalize on an earlier First Amendment victory in the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, [Norton v. Springfield](#), spurring many of those cities to changes their laws and policies affecting oral requests for the immediate donation of money.

Other right to housing initiatives. We also strengthened housing rights more broadly, and set as goals more aggressive enforcement of the McKinney-Vento Act to increase the availability of vacant federal real property for use by programs serving homeless people, and preventing homelessness by strengthening housing rights for vulnerable tenants. To date, we have:

- won further legislative improvements to [Title V](#) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act that have increased the number of applications for vacant federal property under that program;
- worked with local partners to win new housing rights for vulnerable tenants at the state and local levels;
- achieved the reinstatement of the [Protecting Tenants at Foreclosure Act](#), and made it permanent law; and
- worked to strengthen [housing rights](#) under the Violence Against Women Act, recognizing that many people, especially women with children, become homeless while fleeing domestic violence.

Children and Youth. The 2016-18 plan set a goal to help 450,000 homeless children assert their right to education—protected by federal law--through outreach, training, and systems reform. We also set goals to strengthen the law, and build and support a network, Project LEARN, to bring together advocates working on issues affecting homeless children and youth.

We met and exceeded that goal by improving access to education for over 876,000 homeless children and youth, as well as by:

- [strengthening their rights under the Education Title](#) of the McKinney-Vento Act during its reauthorization;
- shaping strong federal guidance implementing the Education Title of the McKinney-Vento Act;
- working with key states to ensure their state plans comply with the new requirements of the Education Title of the McKinney-Vento Act;
- expanding Project LEARN from 11 organizations in 9 states and DC to over 90 members at 40 organizations in 25 states and DC;
- publishing a first-of-its-kind [State Index on Youth Homelessness](#) that evaluates all 50 states and the District of Columbia on their efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness, particularly among LGBTQ+ youth, and launching a companion campaign to strengthen those efforts, both in partnership with Cyndi Lauper's True Colors Fund.

Organizational capacity and positioning. The Law Center added new board members; developed a plan for an advisory board; increased funding in key categories; and was awarded three VISTA positions over three years. We also began planning a new website and a rebranding campaign.

Media mentions, always high, increased, with significant local, national and international coverage, including the [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [LA Times](#), [AP](#), [USA Today](#), [Newsweek](#), [BusinessWeek](#) and [UPI](#); we also received positive editorials supporting our message. We significantly increased our followers to over 10,000 each for both Facebook and Twitter.

We increased pro bono contributions, reaching over \$6 million in 2017 alone – meaning that the Law Center leverages each dollar it raises six times over. We also increased pro bono projects with corporate legal departments and law firms. Our annual [McKinney-Vento event](#) continued to be well-received and our host committee grew.

Current context: Challenges and opportunities

Homelessness continues to be a national crisis, affecting millions of people each year. The focus by the current Administration and Congress on cutting funds for social programs and undermining legal protections is already rolling back some gains and threatens to continue to do so. But recent victories by the Law Center and its allies are making an impact, creating the possibility of a tipping point on the horizon.

Challenges. According to the Joint Center on Housing at Harvard University, [fewer than 25% of Americans poor enough to qualify for federal housing assistance actually receive it](#), there are just 29 affordable and available units for every 100 of the poorest households, and the gap is growing. Emergency housing is also in short supply: According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, [more than 30% of homeless people are unsheltered](#), with no choice but to struggle for survival in public places.

Yet, in communities across the nation, necessary human activities such as sleeping and sitting down in public places are punished as crimes; some cities even prevent private groups from sharing food with homeless and other poor people in public places. [Communities of color](#),

[mentally and physically disabled persons, and LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately affected.](#) Criminalization further marginalizes already disadvantaged communities: getting a job, housing, or public benefits is even more challenging with an arrest record.

Homeless children and youth face additional challenges. Access to school and school services, such as meals, basic health care, special education and gifted programs, sports, and other extracurricular activities, is essential to meeting their immediate needs and preventing their future homelessness. But despite strong legal protections, access to stable education remains elusive for many. Unaccompanied homeless youth—of whom up to 40% are LGBTQ+—face particular challenges, many stemming from their lack of legal rights.

To end homelessness, it is also critical to prevent those at risk from falling into it. As the recent, best-selling book [Evicted](#) makes clear, without strong legal protections, poor tenants—including many who work—are at risk of a cycle of eviction and homelessness that leaves many trapped under the weight of previous evictions and debts they cannot expunge. Domestic violence survivors are especially vulnerable, and domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and their children. And as the foreclosure crisis continues to affect low income Americans, tenants living in foreclosed properties are also vulnerable.

Opportunities. The Law Center and its allies have recently won critical court rulings, including our major Ninth Circuit victory in [Martin v. Boise](#); with our advocacy, this is already changing laws and policies. Our new [letter writing campaign](#) to capitalize on our earlier Seventh Circuit victory in *Norton v. Springfield*, is also spurring many cities to change their laws and policies affecting begging. The [Housing Not Handcuffs campaign](#) is mobilizing advocates as well as unexpected allies, such as city officials and law enforcement organizations, and continued media coverage is helping to amplify our work.

Increased interest in housing issues by key members of Congress as well as state and local policymakers also presents opportunities. Several Senators (Warren, Booker and Harris) recently introduced ambitious proposals, and House members and candidates are also focusing on housing. These initiatives present opportunities for progress on housing as well as for furthering our Housing Not Handcuffs agenda, building on the existing HUD incentive we won during the last Administration. The increased attention also presents opportunities to highlight our issues and agenda.

Our work led to strengthened legal protections for education rights of homeless children and youth, and there is an opportunity for progress through work to ensure their implementation and enforcement. Our new [State Index](#) and initiative on unaccompanied homeless youth has set a baseline and created a powerful new tool for state-level advocacy. [Heightened attention](#) to homelessness and extreme poverty in the United States from international human rights bodies presents opportunities to exert pressure and draw public attention.

We began drawing clearer connections to high visibility issues that affect our work, such as immigration, in coalition with others, and recently secured some funding support for this. We have upped our social media presence, and begun using it more deliberately for fundraising, as well as using our visibility in the media for this purpose.

Plan: 2019-2022

Over the next four years, the Law Center will focus on these key goals:

- Reverse the criminalization of homelessness
- Strengthen housing rights of homeless and at risk people, towards the goal of a human right to housing, with a particular concern for women fleeing domestic abuse
- Protect and strengthen rights of homeless children and youth, with a particular concern for the educational rights of children and special vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness
- Expand and support advocacy networks, including the HNH network and Project LEARN, to support our goals
- Build organizational capacity and sustainability

The HNH campaign will continue to serve as an overarching programmatic framework for our multi-pronged effort to reverse the criminalization of homelessness and to promote housing-based alternatives. The campaign has focused our efforts, framed the issues constructively, and helped mobilize others. It has been effective and impactful, and we will extend it beyond the initial three years, with particular attention to harnessing successes in fighting criminalization to promote housing rights. We will seek funding to hire additional legal staff, including a full-time campaign manager. Project LEARN has also been successful in mobilizing lawyers and advocates working to protect the education and related rights of homeless children and youth, and we will continue to build and expand it with a goal of extending it to all 50 states. We will also continue and build on our work on the legal rights of homeless youth.

To support and expand this work, we will focus increased attention on building organizational capacity, especially raising additional resources. Specific goals follow.

Goal: Reverse the criminalization of homelessness in favor of constructive alternatives.

We will advance this goal over the next four years by working towards these outcomes:

- A critical number of jurisdictions will repeal, constructively modify, or decide not to adopt laws that criminalize homelessness, building momentum for a national policy shift
- Increasing numbers of jurisdictions will adopt laws, policies, or initiatives that promote more constructive approaches, demonstrating success
- The number of organizations and key individuals endorsing the HNH campaign will grow and include law enforcement and city officials and other “unexpected allies”
- Our new HNH Justice Network (HNHJN) will grow and, together with the Law Center, take a growing number of legal actions, including strategic, potentially precedent-setting litigation
- U.N. human rights bodies or officials will condemn the growth of homelessness and its criminalization in the U.S. and make recommendations for improvement, contributing to constructive federal, state, or local actions

We will achieve these outcomes through these main strategies:

- Federal, state, and local policy reform, including developing model policies, educating policymakers, and advocating, with partners, at the federal, state, and local levels

- Strategic litigation, including developing new legal theories to support affirmative remedies and formulating strategies to realize the full impact of positive rulings, such as letter writing campaigns
- Building and supporting the Housing Not Handcuffs Campaign, including our new HNHJN, through a resource bank, list serve and coordination
- Developing and maintaining a new password-protected litigation resource bank and listserv, to support expanded litigation efforts and strategic coordination; and expanding strategic alliances with law enforcement and other “non-traditional” allies
- Providing legal guidance and support to local advocates and sympathetic city officials, whether through the HNH network or outside it

Goal: Expand housing rights and resources

We will advance this goal over the next four years by working towards these outcomes:

- Increased funding for low income housing programs, including housing vouchers
- Increased numbers of applicants will secure vacant federal property at no cost to house and serve homeless people
- Increased numbers of tenants at foreclosure will receive at least 90 days’ notice before having to move
- More jurisdictions will adopt policies protecting rights of vulnerable tenants, such as prohibiting source-of-income discrimination and ensuring a right to counsel for tenants facing eviction
- Housing rights of domestic violence survivors will be strengthened

We will achieve these outcomes through these main strategies

- Litigating to correct non-compliance with federal vacant property law, engaging in legislative and regulatory advocacy to improve the law and its implementation
- Developing materials, training, and outreach strategies to inform beneficiaries and their advocates of rights of vulnerable tenants and how to claim them
- Developing a menu of models for state and local policies to strengthen renters’ rights and supporting state and local partners to advocate for them
- Working in coalition with others to strengthen and implement federal protections

Goal: Protect and expand rights of homeless children and youth.

We will advance this goal over the next four years by working towards these outcomes:

- Increased numbers of homeless children will have improved access to stable education
- Project LEARN will cover all 50 states
- States will improve laws and policies affecting unaccompanied homeless youth

We will achieve these outcomes through these main strategies:

- Policy advocacy to improve state and local compliance with the homeless children’s federal education rights, as recently strengthened
- Litigating to correct non-compliance
- Conducting outreach and training, preparing materials

Goal: Build organizational capacity and sustainability

We will advance this goal over the next four years by working towards these outcomes:

- Raise at least: \$1.2 million in 2019 and \$1.4 in 2020; set goals for 2021 and 2022 as part of mid-term review
- Board fundraising raises or helps raise a significant percentage of these funds, supplemented by advisory board and supported by staff
- An increase of contributed revenues in all current categories: foundations, corporate, law firm, individual
- Cash reserve is replenished and grows
- Pro bono partnerships increase and are strengthened to support program and revenues
- Media and social media visibility increase and support fundraising and program goals
- First rate, diverse staff is retained and supported including with competitive salaries

We will achieve these outcomes through these main strategies

- Build board and advisory board
- Increase foundation outreach and engagement
- Grow pro bono partnerships, including corporate legal departments; build LEAP membership.
- Build individual revenues by targeting pro bono lawyers
- Continue to build our monthly donors program
- Explore federal grants or sub-grants for targeted programmatic areas

Conclusion

This is a critical time for the Law Center, its work, and its mission to end and prevent homelessness in America. The challenges presented by the Administration, Congress and the overall climate are daunting. But despite these challenges, from 2016-18 we made major strides toward our bold vision for systemic change that can truly end and prevent homelessness in America. We also strengthened our organization with new partnerships and networks that connect us more deeply to the broader movement for social justice. Going forward, we must stay focused on our vision--and continue to strengthen our capacity to fully execute on it.