

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS



The criminalization of homelessness refers to policies, laws, and local ordinances that make it illegal, difficult, or impossible for unsheltered people to engage in life-sustaining activities such as sleeping, eating, asking for donations, or simply existing in public spaces. Over the past 25 years, cities across the country have enacted policies that make it effectively illegal to be unsheltered despite a critical shortage of homeless shelter beds and housing supports.

WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE IN MEMPHIS/SHELBY COUNTY?

- Loitering – Ordinances with vague definitions of “lingering” or “loitering” leave unsheltered individuals vulnerable to criminal penalties for residing in public areas.
- Panhandling - Criminal penalties for panhandling in certain areas of the city during certain times. This includes bans on panhandling within 25 feet of any marked crosswalk.

CRIMINALIZATION WORSENS HOMELESSNESS

Laws punishing unsheltered individuals are ineffective at reducing homelessness and costly to taxpayers. Anti-homeless legislation has resulted in an overrepresentation of unsheltered individuals in the criminal justice system by creating a costly revolving door that circulates unhoused people from the street to jail and back. **Approximately 68% of individuals assessed for housing assistance in Memphis/Shelby County have reported being in jail at some point.** Chronic homelessness, due in part to its criminalization, costs the public between \$30,000 and \$50,000 per person every year through the use of public systems like law enforcement, jails, and hospitals.

CRIMINALIZATION IS COSTLY AND WASTES TAXPAYER DOLLARS

Anti-homeless legislation like panhandling and loitering ordinances fail to address the underlying causes of homelessness in the community and even serve to worsen it by creating additional barriers to exiting homelessness. Many people experiencing homelessness have no choice but to live on the streets. Rather than connecting individuals to housing and necessary services, these laws result in fees, fines, and even jail time for individuals experiencing homelessness. Arresting and incarcerating unhoused people for living outside makes it more difficult for them to access employment, healthcare, housing, and other services necessary to be able exit homelessness.





THE SOLUTION

EXPANDING HOUSING AND SERVICES

Housing is a proven cost-effective solution to homelessness. Numerous studies have shown that providing housing and services costs taxpayers 2-3 times less than cycling unsheltered individuals through the criminal justice system. Housing First is premised on the idea that pairing people with immediate access to their own housing – without barriers and without mandated compliance with services - is the best way to sustainably end their homelessness. Housing First programs like Permanent Supportive Housing have demonstrated successful outcomes, and reduced costs to taxpayers. Housing is the solution to the crisis of homelessness. Housing people saves public money, improves public health and public safety, and it improves the lives—or even saves the lives—of people who would otherwise struggle for survival in shared public space for lack of any other options. Rather than punishing unsheltered individuals, **our community can end homelessness through investments in outreach and housing for unsheltered individuals.**

RESOURCES

Instead of calling on law enforcement to respond to an unsheltered individual, you can:

- **Submit a Homeless Outreach Request Form through the CAFTH website** - If you're concerned about someone sleeping in an unsheltered location, you can complete an Outreach Request Form on the CAFTH website (www.cafth.org) and we will attempt to send an outreach team to assess their needs.

SHARE HOUSING RESOURCES

- For unsheltered families with children: call MIFA's 24/7 Emergency Housing hotline at **901-529-4545**
- For individual adults: Hospitality Hub Plaza at 590 Washington Avenue is open Monday through Friday from 9AM - 4PM
- *For additional agencies and resources, visit www.cafth.org/get-help/*

CRISIS RESPONSE RESOURCES

- Alliance Healthcare Services - Adult Mobile Crisis Services provides 24/7 crisis intervention hotline and referral, including mobile crisis assessment services, crisis respite services and crisis stabilization services for residents of Shelby County ages 18 and over by calling **(901) 577-9400**
- Memphis Police Department Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) has special training to respond to emergencies involving residents with mental health issues. CIT officers may be requested by dialing the nearest precinct or calling MPD's Non-Emergency Number **(901-545-2677** extension "0") and telling the dispatch this is a mental health concern

ABOUT COMMUNITY ALLIANCE FOR THE HOMELESS

Community Alliance for the Homeless (CAFTH) is a private, nonprofit entity that provides planning, technical assistance, and service coordination to public and private agencies working to end homelessness in Memphis and Shelby County. We are devoted to ending long-term homelessness and ensuring that future homelessness is rare, brief, and one-time.

