



Pathway to Frontline Shelter Sustainability

An Urgent Call to Action from the Shelter Providers Network

The Shelter Providers Network consists of representatives from Huckleberry House, Lutheran Social Services, Maryhaven, Southeast, YMCA, YWCA, and Community Development for All People. Together these organizations operate emergency shelters with nearly 1,400 beds and nearly 300 overflow beds in case of cold weather or crisis. Last year, they served 9,500 people with homelessness and domestic violence intervention services.

The economic analysis included in this paper was completed by Dr. Robert J. Gitter, Ph.D.
Professor of Economics, Emeritus of Ohio Wesleyan University.



CALL TO ACTION

In the context of the loss of COVID-era funds and in response to the increasing number and duration of people experiencing homelessness, a coalition of seven emergency shelter providers (the Shelter Providers Network) calls for **urgent action to establish a dedicated funding mechanism that will ensure sustainable support of the existing emergency shelter system.**

The Network also will engage in all necessary ways to advance progress on the Community Shelter Board’s 2024 Homelessness Assessment Recommendations to decrease homelessness in our region.

Homelessness in Columbus and Franklin County: A Public Service Inequitably Funded and Inequitably Faced

The number of people experiencing homelessness has sharply risen across the United States. Perversely, this trend is most pronounced in areas of growth and prosperity – including in Columbus and Franklin County. The consequences of homelessness on both individuals and communities are profound, including physical and behavioral health risks, education and income barriers, and the escalating use of tax dollars on emergency services. In Franklin County, Black households are 53% of the people experiencing homelessness while constituting just 26% of the overall population – **making a mandate to solve homelessness one of the region’s most pressing equity issues.**

Of all basic human needs, **shelter stands alone** in our nation as the one need that receives no dedicated, sustained government funding. The federal government’s housing programs are capped and do not fund emergency shelter. The result is that local communities must independently deliver a strong emergency shelter safety net – combining an excellent model of care with consistent support from city and county governments so their residents can access the safety and basic dignity of shelter.

BEDS	TOTALS
Total Beds	1,382
Overflow Beds	289
Individuals served (2023)	9,528 ¹

Like other regions, Franklin County’s increase in homelessness results from an underlying housing crisis. Decades of rapid population growth have strained existing housing supply and far outpaced new housing development. This contributes to a rise in housing costs beyond what low-income people can afford, and it results not only in greater numbers of people experiencing homelessness but also in longer lengths of stay in shelter.

¹ The shelter numbers were synthesized between an unduplicated count at Maryhaven and a family count at the Van Buren family shelter using an estimated length of stay of 40 days and an estimated 3-person family size.

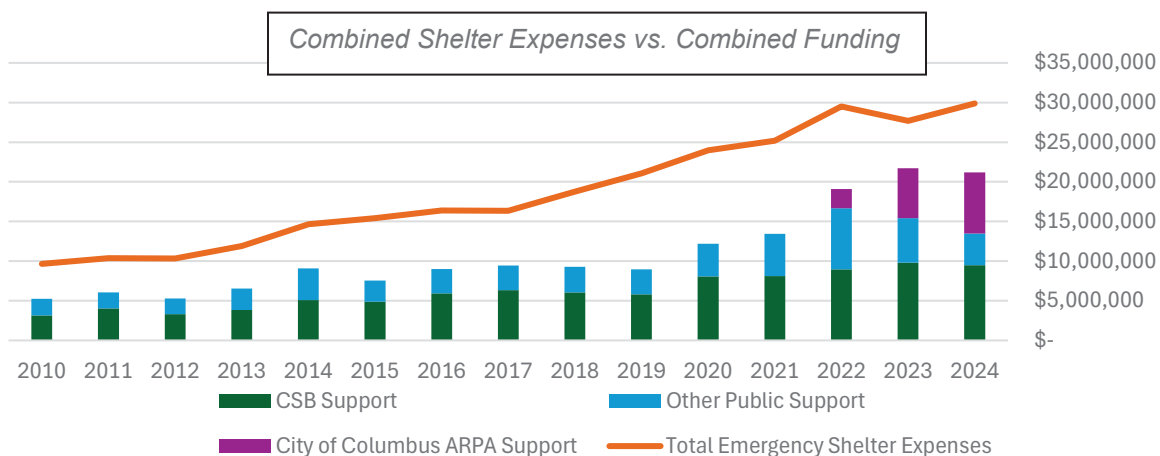
While shelter stays at their most effective are short and lead quickly to permanent housing, that goal is further out of reach than ever in a tight housing market like Central Ohio’s, with fewer and fewer deeply affordable units. Shelters in Franklin County today are therefore overcrowded and have limited funding for the extra tools needed to secure housing in Central Ohio’s current economy.

Despite these obstacles, local shelter providers beat the odds. They continue to serve unhoused people in safe, dignified settings – providing trauma-informed intervention strategies, meals, clean and safe living conditions, and childcare. The outcomes that providers manage to produce even qualify Central Ohio for bonus HUD dollars to support critical layered strategies like Rapid Rehousing and Permanent Supportive Housing. Without question, the Shelter Providers Network is capable and prepared to engage the recommendations of the 2024 Homelessness Assessment – critical tools to reduce overcrowding, promote safety, right-size the system for single adults, and match more residents more quickly with housing.

How We Got Here: A Growing Reality of Mismatched Expenses and Funding

The local funding model for shelter services already was not keeping pace prior to 2020, and when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, one-time federal dollars were allocated for medium-term but temporary relief. This one-time infusion allowed providers to keep shelter beds open and address the present pandemic crisis, while delaying the community-wide work needed to establish sustainable funding.

Emergency shelter providers have subsisted on flat funding despite escalating service costs for years. The chart below illustrates that over the last 15 years, **the Shelter Providers Network has covered a \$117M gap** between CSB/public funding and total emergency shelter expenses, utilizing donations and revenue from social enterprises. The annual gap has steadily increased to an unsustainable level, now having exceeded \$11.5M three years in a row, a gap that is impossible to close through other sources. ***The problem requires a new solution.***



Other Public Support includes ADAMH, Medicaid, VOCA, Ohio Office of Violence Prevention, City of Columbus, Franklin County, and others. The seven shelters included are: Huckleberry House, Lutheran Social Services’ CHOICES and Faith Mission, Maryhaven’s Engagement Center, Southeast Inc’s Friends of the Homeless, YMCA’s Van Buren Center, and the YWCA Family Center.

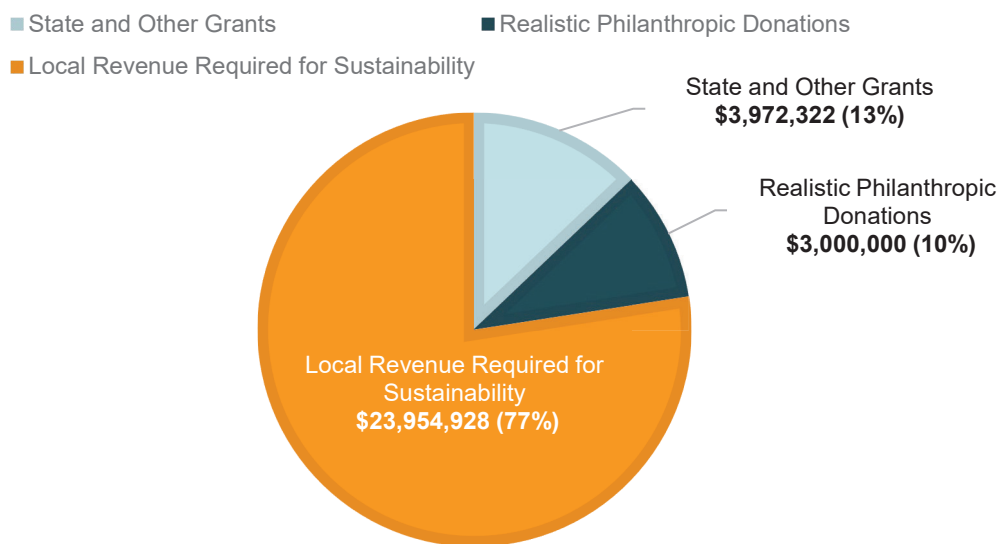
In a growing region, we recognize that our local governments have mounting pressures on their general revenue funds – while at the same time, that population spike also increases pressures on the homelessness sector. The local funding system designed long ago that relies on local GRFs and corporate philanthropy is proving impractical today as it could not have envisioned the markedly different circumstances and length of homelessness.

Looking ahead, future underfunding of the front-line providers that serve unhoused people will harm our most marginalized residents and imperil the economic and budgetary futures of our city and county. Cities like Portland, San Diego, Boston, and others are thriving by many economic measures – like Columbus – but are also marred by their inability to address and fund a path out of their well-documented homelessness crises.

The Path Forward

Fueled by economic growth and a housing inventory that has not kept pace, the number of people experiencing homelessness continues to rise across Franklin County. Meanwhile, the emergency shelter system tasked with the frontline function of serving unhoused people runs at an unsustainable deficit. Because expenses are operating in nature, shelter costs grow annually at a predictable range of between three and five percent – the same pace as the overall local economy. That means in 2025, expenses will conservatively total about \$31 million. While general revenue support from the City and County via the Community Shelter Board support about \$9.5 million of this total, an overwhelming portion of shelter operations will be defunded by the exit of ARPA dollars on December 21, 2024.

2025 TOTAL SHELTER EXPENSES \$30,927,249



In our community **the cost of doing nothing to secure permanent dedicated funding for emergency shelter providers would be extreme.** Within six months, shelter beds would close and the quality of services would decrease due to a lack of staff. These quick and stark realities will also add up to worse ratings on HUD’s measurement of the region, which ultimately equates to less HUD funding for other interventions like rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing – creating a ripple effect of diminished services across many housing programs for Franklin County’s most marginalized populations.

The only way to support the safety and dignity of unhoused people while protecting the diverse needs of our local governments and advancing long-term economic development is to **secure a sustainable, predictable, and equitable funding stream for emergency shelter services outside of local general revenue funds.**

Our community has the tools available to stabilize emergency shelters and fund an optimized homelessness response system. The leadership of our local elected officials is essential to ensuring that our community’s growing homelessness and equity crisis is strategically and humanely addressed. It will also chart the course for a vision of how a growing region can support its most vulnerable residents and build a future where no one is left behind.