



# Working with Unhoused People in Parks: Steps to Take in Your Community

Parks are places where people can recreate, learn, gather, and rest, including individuals who do not have homes. Some of the most vulnerable individuals experiencing homelessness turn to public parks as a sanctuary for safety and rest. At its core, Safe Routes to Parks seeks to increase park usage and improve health for people of all ages, races, abilities, disabilities, and income levels, and as a concept, does not discriminate against unhoused people. Yet, in communities across the country, the presence of unhoused people and the associated challenges also undermine feelings of safety, security, and desire to use local parks by housed residents.

The causes and impacts of homelessness are multifactorial, and Safe Routes Partnership cannot pretend to offer a perfect solution. Instead, this fact sheet invites non-profit organizations, community-based organizations (CBOs), and advocates to think through multiple perspectives on how unhoused people resting, living, and gathering in parks affects overall park access and use compassionately and practically. It offers “Steps to Take in Your Community” in each section for tips on how to put ideas into action.



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## Rising Rates of Homelessness

2020 marked the fourth straight year of national-level increases in homelessness.<sup>1</sup> According to the State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition report, there were 580,466 people experiencing homelessness in the United States as of January 2020.<sup>2</sup> The report also found that homelessness disproportionately impacts people of color, and that higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, less access to healthcare, and higher incarceration rates are some of the factors likely contributing to higher rates of homelessness among people of color.<sup>3</sup> The data that informed this 2020 report was collected prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 and does not reflect any shifts in homelessness that may have occurred as a result of the pandemic.

Historical and ongoing injustices, including racist housing and land-use policies, combined with current economic and public health crises, have created a situation where unhoused or housing-insecure individuals are increasingly reliant on public places for rest. This has naturally led to increased camping at public parks and trails, which can result in public safety issues, social conflicts between park users, as well as health and environmental concerns. Advocates can begin to work through these issues by looking at local statistics and considering strategies for talking about and working with unhoused individuals.



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## STEPS TO TAKE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Find out the current numbers of people experiencing homelessness in your state. Visit the [State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition](#) report for a clickable map to view detailed homelessness statistics, shelter bed inventory, and system capacity by state. As you look through your state's data, consider these questions to begin identifying partnerships and strategies to help meet your community's specific challenges:

- How have the numbers changed in recent years? Are there local actions or events (increased housing prices, natural disaster, etc.) that have contributed to these changes?
- What surprises you about these statistics? If numbers are higher than expected, how can the visibility of this issue be addressed in your community?
- What other homelessness data might be available in your state? Check with your public health agency or local [Continuum of Care \(CoC\)](#) program to see what additional information may be available in your area.
- Is your community conducting homelessness counts in the parks you live near or work with?
- What do you think are the contributing factors to homelessness in your community? How might your organization play a role in addressing these factors?

## Talking about Unhoused Individuals and Creating Balance Among All Park Users

It is important to approach the complexities of homelessness and related camping, resting, and living in public spaces from a solution-driven and compassionate place. The way people talk about issues influences their perception of them, which means non-profit advocates and partners working on Safe Routes to Parks can model the solution-oriented mindset by being deliberate about word choice and how to communicate about unhoused people. When talking about individuals who are experiencing homelessness, be sure to emphasize personhood over housing status.



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### TRY PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

#### *Say this...*

Use terms like "unhoused people" or "unsheltered individuals"

"Person with substance use disorder"

"Person who has diabetes"

"Young adult impacted by the justice system"

Use specific terms like "drug paraphernalia" or "litter"

#### *Instead of...*

Referring to groups of individuals as "the homeless"

"Addict" or "Junkie"

"They're a diabetic"

"Juvenile delinquent"

Referring to activities or people as "unwanted" or "undesirable"

**In these examples, having diabetes or involvement with the justice system may be one condition of a person's life but is not the defining attribute. Similarly, a person is not defined by their lack of permanent address. When discussing public safety or park appearance concerns, specifically call out the issues that need to be addressed.**

Balancing frustrations from housed park users with hardships faced by unhoused park users is no easy task, but public education can be an important piece of addressing homelessness in parks. Education and outreach efforts can help raise public awareness that each person experiencing homelessness is unique, and unhoused people are part of the community. National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) offers some [ideas](#) for generating community support with interpretative signage, public statements, pamphlets, and community forums.<sup>4</sup>

To help build bridges between housed and unhoused individuals, non-profit and CBO advocates can also plan family-oriented activities and events that draw in more of the surrounding neighborhood, increase park use, strengthen the community, and deepen understandings of the root causes and daily life of homelessness. Work with your local parks and

recreation agency to host activation events that help spur regular activity at the park and help housed park users feel more comfortable using that space. Partner with the local community and faith-based organizations to organize food distribution and community meal events with proper permits, sanitation services, and trash disposal. By deepening collective understanding of the barriers and challenges around homelessness, parks can become a much more inclusive and accessible place for all people.



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## STEPS TO TAKE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- Consider a public messaging campaign to increase community awareness and support for unhoused individuals. In a 2019 article featured by NRPA, Milo Neild, M.S., and Jeff Rose, Ph.D. offer recommendations for messaging for public education, homelessness awareness, and generating community support.<sup>5</sup> Statements like, “All members of the community are welcome to use public parks and open spaces” and “Each person experiencing homelessness is unique” can help parks and recreation professionals seeking to engage the community around the issue of homelessness and deepen collective understanding. Include these messages in pamphlets, interpretive signage, on social media, and at community meetings. [Download this poster](#) with adapted messaging, or [customize this template](#) in Canva with your own messaging and logo!
- Broaden your perspective and center compassion in how you and your organization approach the issue of homelessness, starting with your words. Ask yourself how you refer to unhoused communities in your day-to-day speech and review your organization or agency’s language. Does your messaging emphasize personhood over housing status? Lead an activity with your team to explore how you can improve person-first language in your work. Here are some examples to try or adapt:
  - [Project Enable Person-First Language and Sensitivity Activities](#)
  - [Iris Center Disability Awareness Activity: People-First Language](#)
- Review this [guide](#) from 8 80 Cities and AARP for more ideas on developing inclusive approaches to addressing homelessness in parks. The guide offers resources for inclusive engagement, activities, and programming, as well as recommendations for designing parks for dignity, trauma-informed care approaches, and more.<sup>6</sup>

## Public Camping Laws and Alternatives to Sweeps and Removals

As advocates consider actions they can take to preserve public safety and quality of parks and open spaces, they must also take actions that preserve the dignity of all park users, including alternatives to sweeps (i.e. unhoused camp removals). Camping and sleeping on public property are prohibited across many parts of the United States, but cities are limited in how they can enforce camping bans. According to a 2017 National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) membership survey, 28 percent of urban park and recreation agency directors indicated that their agencies could remove people camping in parks only after providing notice, generally 72 hours.<sup>7</sup> Fifty-six percent of urban directors indicated that their agency could remove individuals experiencing homelessness encamped in their parks with little or no notice.<sup>8</sup>

Homelessness is not against the law, however, and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled that cities cannot clear unhoused people from parks and public spaces if there are more unhoused people than there are shelter beds available.<sup>9</sup> The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has also determined that the temporary alternative use of the right of way for shelters and other facilities that provide services to people experiencing homelessness can benefit both impacted individuals and the greater community.<sup>10</sup> The FHWA has provided [recommendations](#) to state departments of transportation for requesting this alternative use of the public right of way.<sup>11</sup>



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Removing people and campsites from parks can be detrimental to individuals experiencing homelessness, causing them to disperse and potentially lose access to their personal belongings and essential services. It can also be harsh on cities' budgets. For example, a 2019 study showed that Chicago, Illinois, Houston, Texas, San Jose, California, and Tacoma, Washington paid between \$3.6 and \$8.6 million in FY 2019 to manage and clear camps.<sup>12</sup> A 2019 audit of Portland, Oregon's camping sweep and cleaning efforts revealed that it cost the city nearly \$3.6 million a year.<sup>13</sup> Instead of costly camp sweeps and forceful removal of individuals from parks, consider alternatives that connect people with services and promote safe park usage by all community members.

In Modesto, CA, a 12-acre city park was selected to serve as a designated space where individuals experiencing homelessness could congregate and sleep without penalty.<sup>14</sup> The designated camping park was equipped with portable restrooms, handwashing stations, and dumpsters for trash. Although it was a short-term solution, the community saw an immediate improvement in its other park facilities.

In the meantime, the city was able to enforce no sleeping rules in all other public spaces under their stewardship and worked with partners at the county, faith-based organizations, and homelessness advocates to prepare the Modesto Outdoor Emergency Shelter (MOES), which is more suitable for helping individuals on a path to housing security.

For years, Franklin Park in Washington, D.C., has been a hub for individuals experiencing homelessness to camp, access essential services, and have meals.<sup>15</sup> However, in June 2020, the park closed for a year to undergo an \$18 million renovation, including a new children's play area, fountain, and walking paths.<sup>16</sup> While many D.C. residents looked forward to the updated amenities, unhoused individuals and advocates expressed their concerns for how the renovation would displace unhoused communities during and after the redevelopment.<sup>17</sup> As a result, during the closure of Franklin Park, meal services were moved to an alternative site, and unhoused individuals were encouraged to access more specialized services at a nearby church.<sup>18</sup> While some D.C. residents experiencing homelessness and advocates have concerns about how they will be received in the renovated park, Franklin Park offers an example of how to consider the needs and desires of all park users, including those experiencing homelessness, during park redevelopment.



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The City of Eugene, OR partners with local community-based organizations to offer coordinated mental health response services, as well as designated rest areas. CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) is a community-based public safety system to provide mental health first response to those in need. It is an effective non-policing strategy for working with individuals experiencing crises involving mental health, homelessness, and addiction that has been built into the city's emergency call system.<sup>19</sup> The city also offers a rest stop program, which provides a temporary option for a limited number of people experiencing homelessness to legally camp overnight in designated areas of the city.<sup>20</sup> Local non-profits like Community Supported Shelters also partner with the city to offer legal, designated sleeping places for people who are without a conventional form of housing.<sup>21</sup>

Changes in park design and programming can also help address public safety in and around parks.<sup>22</sup> Increased visibility, through improved lighting and brush clearing, improves both the perception of and actual safety for all park users, including vulnerable individuals experiencing homelessness. And installing and maintaining public restrooms provides an appropriate space for all park users to maintain privacy and meet basic needs.



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## STEPS TO TAKE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Consider how public camping policies, laws, and management strategies are impacting your parks and greater community:

- Talk with your city's parks and recreation agency or city manager's office to determine what public camping laws are in place. Partner with local social service agencies and non-profits to ensure compliance with city policy.
- Take a look at your city's spending on camp management or removal. Consider and discuss with decision-makers whether those expenses could be used instead to support a dedicated sleeping location or a mental health response team.
- Think about what park design and programming steps you can take to improve overall public safety. Organize a [walk audit](#) and partner with community advocates to invite both housed and unhoused park users to assess park safety through multiple perspectives. Is visibility an issue in your local parks? Consider installing improved lighting in and around parks or host a community park cleanup day to clear brush and remove visibility barriers.
- Explore the criminalization of homelessness with this American Civil Liberties Union [podcast](#) that takes a deeper dive into the federal appeals court decision related to public camping bans, as well as systemic obstacles to addressing the needs of unhoused individuals.

## Partnerships to Reduce Harm and Provide Services

Substance abuse and related waste are common health and safety concerns in parks. Unhoused individuals are at high risk for substance addiction, as it is a contributor and byproduct of living unhoused. Both a cause and consequence of homelessness, research shows that over a third of unhoused individuals experience alcohol and drug issues, and up to two-thirds have a lifetime history of an alcohol or drug disorder.<sup>23</sup> Consider talking with your parks and recreation agency to explore what practices can be adopted to reduce harm in parks. While parks and recreation professionals may not have entered their fields to tackle complex homelessness and substance abuse issues, they can contribute to short-term and long-term solutions. From equipping staff with overdose-reducing drugs like Naloxone, to offering training that helps deepen understanding of the homelessness and substance abuse epidemics, parks and recreation professionals can help with reducing harm and conflict in parks. For an upstream approach to prevention, they can also play a role in offering pain management classes and practices, like Walk With Ease, Tai Chi, and spending time in nature to help individuals reduce toxic stress and find community connections.<sup>24</sup>

Establishing partnerships with public health, treatment providers, and unhoused advocacy organizations can be critical in meeting some of these challenges by providing health services and connecting individuals with housing and treatment solutions. These partners can also help communities explore effective interventions like harm reduction and syringe service programs (SSPs), also known as needle exchange programs, which are important parts of the public health response to outbreaks of overdose and infectious diseases. The North American Syringe Exchange Network (NASEN) has a [nationwide directory](#) of SSPs and other harm reduction services like Naloxone services and drop-in centers.

### STEPS TO TAKE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Try these approaches for connecting unhoused communities with essential services, like harm reduction and pain management classes:

- Meet with your local public health agency, treatment providers, and unhoused community advocates to learn how they are working to address substance use challenges. Ask how you or your organization can provide support and partnership to their efforts.
- Talk with your city's parks and recreation programming staff about offering pain management classes at parks, like Tai Chi and yoga. Is there an existing [Walk With Ease](#) program, or could you start a class with your parks and recreation department?
- Reference this [comprehensive report](#) from NRPA for ideas on responding to substance use in parks and recreation, including substance use disposal techniques, carrying and administering Naloxone, and facility modifications.
- Be a partner in connecting essential services to those in need by activating parks as internet hubs. Individuals experiencing homelessness often lack access to reliable internet service, a key tool to accessing needed services like shelters, job applications, and medical care. Covid-19 has further exacerbated the lack of access to internet and needed services for unhoused communities.<sup>25</sup> Public parks can be a convenient location for individuals to connect to the internet and essential services. Consider this [guide](#) from Allconnect, which offers downloadable infographics on homelessness and the digital divide, local resources and ways the community can help, as well as information on state and federal support programs.





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## Conclusion

Tackling the complex issues of homelessness is not easy and there are many perspectives to consider. With tools for using person-first language, learning about public camping laws, and identifying proactive approaches to harm-reduction and public education, you can start to rethink overall park access for housed and unhoused park users. Non-profit and CBO advocates can work with city agencies and community partners to determine which holistic solutions work best in each unique community.

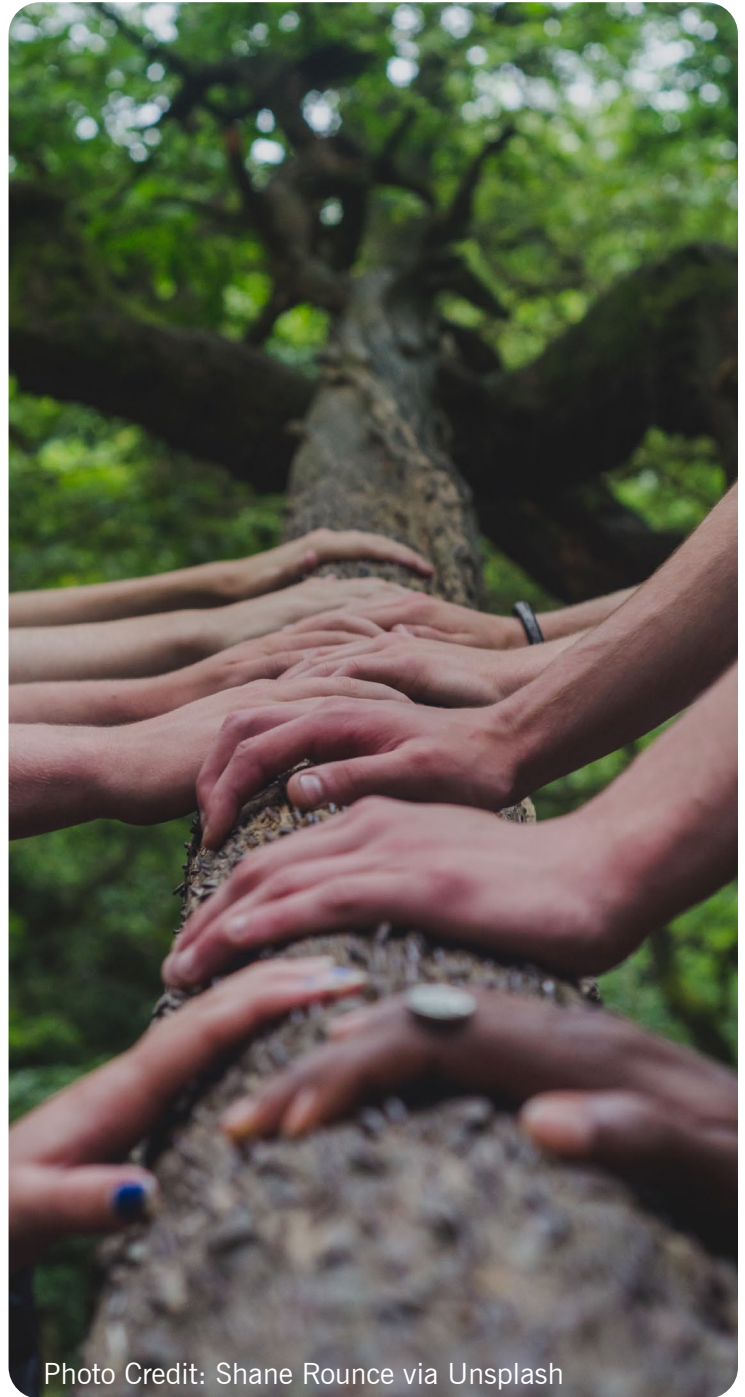


Photo Credit: Shane Rounce via Unsplash

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