Philanthropy and Homelessness: What's Changed, What's the Same, and What's Still Needed

Martha Ramirez | July 24, 2025

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The U.S. has hit record-high levels of homelessness. According to data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a total of 771,480 people experienced homelessness on a single night in 2024. It's the highest recorded number since reporting began in 2007, surpassing 2023's record high of 653,100 people, and is an 18.1% increase over the previous year.

For U.S. philanthropy, this represents an ongoing failure — one that raises pressing questions about how funders are serving the most disadvantaged among us. But while philanthropy cannot solve homelessness alone, it can still play an important role in addressing its symptoms, as well as causes.

Funders have tended to shy away from supporting efforts to end homelessness, with many seeing it as an overly complex, "no-win issue." Nevertheless, in the years leading up to 2020, funders were more hopeful about making progress.

Then came the pandemic. One might expect homelessness to have worsened during the crisis. Data, however, shows homelessness levels remained relatively stable both in the years leading up to the pandemic and during the crisis itself. It wasn't until 2023 that we saw levels start to rise, and then skyrocket in 2024.

A likely explanation for this, which HUD notes in its report, is that both public and private funding surged during COVID. In addition to federal pandemic aid packages — such as the American Rescue Plan and the CARES Act — as well as statewide and local efforts, philanthropy also rose to the occasion.

An analysis of data from Candid across various subcategories for homelessness and housing development reveals that between 2015 and 2019, 501c3 funding totaled around $13.1 billion. Between 2020 and 2024, funding rose to about $19.2 billion. There are, of course, gaps and omissions in this data (for instance, Candid's data does not include funding awarded through LLCs), and some of this money isn't going directly to anti-homelessness or affordable housing work. But it is telling that even when looking at Candid's data on funding earmarked for homeless populations alone, philanthropic funding still increased across the same time periods from $6.5 billion to $9.4 billion.

U.S. Homeless Population in Recent Years

The annual Point-in-Time count is a survey of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January.

Year	Total Homeless Population
2015	564,708
2016	549,928
2017	553,742
2018	552,830
2019	567,715
2020	580,466
2021	
2022	582,462
2023	653,100
2024	771,480

Note: there is no data for 2021 as the Point-in-Time count was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development • Created with Datawrapper

This increase in both public and private funding "held off the rise in homelessness that we are now seeing," said Jeff Olivet, then executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), in an AP News interview at the end of 2023. Now that the COVID crisis has effectively passed, however, government funding has dwindled and pandemic-era protections have lapsed.

Despite setbacks, philanthropic funders have expressed that they remain committed to making progress on the homelessness crisis in the U.S.

"This needs to be an active time in homelessness and housing philanthropy. There are so many challenges in the field, it's important for funders to step up, working in deep partnership with advocates, providers, communities, and other funders, to double down on what's proven to work — while also supporting bold and innovative solutions to meet emerging needs," said Aimee Hendrigan, executive vice president of the Connecticut-based Melville Charitable Trust, which dedicates its entire grantmaking portfolio to combatting homelessness and housing insecurity in the United States.

In many ways, funders' efforts to address homelessness, both before and through the COVID era, are good illustrations of the limits of private philanthropy. While funders do have plenty of options for how they can tackle the problem, including recent innovations that have made a marked difference in lives of many, the data is clear: Without an increase in public funding, particularly from the federal level, and real progress on the root causes of the problem, homelessness in the U.S. will not be "solved" in any lasting or national sense. As both funders and experts have noted, the solutions are there; it's the large-scale funding that's in short supply.

For all the good that philanthropy can do — and there is a lot of it, as this report will highlight — it is imperative for funders to use their resources to push for action from the public sector. While this may seem like a futile effort at the federal level given the current administration, long-term thinking alongside attention to improving the effectiveness of local solutions is critical.

A "housing first" approach to ending homelessness

Over the years, funders have addressed homelessness in a variety of ways. Long before the onset of the pandemic, for instance, most funders had embraced a "housing first" strategy.

Housing First is a harm reduction approach that prioritizes getting people into permanent housing and then providing wraparound services, said Dr. Benjamin Henwood, director of the Homelessness Policy Research Institute and the Center for Homelessness, Housing and Health Equity Research, both at USC. Wraparound services are designed to provide personalized support and resources to help people address the challenges that often accompany homelessness and can impede them from obtaining long-term housing stability. Services include things like behavioral health support, medical assistance, workforce development opportunities, family support services, financial literacy education and budgeting counseling.

Housing First differs from other approaches because it does not require people to have first dealt with any underlying issues that contributed to their housing situation, nor does it require people to make use of any wraparound services that are offered.

"Getting people housed solves so many of the challenges and complexities around the homeless population. [The] first thing you [have] to do is get a roof over their head and get them into a safe place, and then all the other things can happen from there — mental health, drug addiction, all of these things… It all starts with putting a roof over their heads," said donor Jeffrey Katzenberg in an 2024 interview with Inside Philanthropy.

Housing First was developed in New York City in 1992 by Dr. Sam J. Tsemberis through a program called Pathways to Housing, which was a response to an earlier model of homeless service delivery that focused on treating or "curing" people of issues like mental illness and substance abuse before providing them with permanent housing, Henwood said. During a four-year trial, which was funded by the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), individuals were randomly assigned to either a Housing First slot or to the mainstream "treatment first" slot. Studies at the time found that Housing First was significantly more successful in keeping people housed.

The initial findings were first published in 2004, and Housing First quickly became national policy under the President George W. Bush administration. According to "Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives," which was co-authored by Henwood, Tsemberis and Deborah K. Padgett, USICH began promoting Housing First as a "central antidote" to homelessness. Then-USICH Executive Director Philip Mangano saw Housing First as "the most effective [approach] in ending chronic homelessness" — ending it, not just managing it — and advocated for its widespread adoption.

One of Mangano's accomplishments was facilitating an agreement to issue $35 million in federal funding for a national initiative to end chronic homelessness. Of the 400-plus communities that developed plans to end homelessness, more than 70% included a Housing First program. Four USICH members — HUD, the Department of Health and Human Services, SAMHSA and the Veterans Administration — provided funding to start Housing First programs.

In 2010, the federal government published its first comprehensive plan to end homelessness and declared Housing First to be the "clear solution" to chronic homelessness.

"That's a pretty radical shift…People see Housing First [as] top-down, government-imposed policy, but really, it was this novel fringe idea that then became widely adopted," Henwood said. "Typically, you don't see very effective empirical, data-driven policy decisions, but in this case, this was sort of a… unique example where government actually let research guide its decisions."

Some philanthropic funders also began providing grants to support a Housing First approach across the U.S. In 2004, for example, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation awarded a five-year grant to the Corporation for Supportive Housing to develop a Housing First model in Los Angeles, focusing on providing permanent supportive housing for people with mental illnesses.

In the period leading up to 2020, Housing First had come to enjoy wide popularity among grantmakers. But not everyone is behind it. Although there is ample evidence in favor of the approach when it comes to offering long-term housing stability to chronically homeless people, Housing First has drawn a growing amount of skepticism, including from conservative think tanks, such as the Cicero Institute, and Republican lawmakers, including Rep. Andy Barr (R-KY) and Vice President J.D. Vance, the *New York Times* reported.

"We know that housing is the solution to homelessness," said Amanda Andere, outgoing CEO of Funders Together for Housing Justice (formerly Funders Together to End Homelessness), one of the leading philanthropic affinity groups in the space. "I think there are other philanthropic entities that I would say are not aligned with us, that want folks to believe that Housing First is housing only, that this is not a structural issue, that it might be related to one's personal behavior failure. None of the funders that we work with feel that way."

Detractors of Housing First argue that the high levels of homelessness in the U.S. show that this approach doesn't work. Many experts, however, say that the problem doesn't lie with the policy itself, but rather with the sheer number of people becoming homeless — i.e., Housing First would solve the problem if underlying structural issues weren't so severe. Research has also shown a Housing First approach is cost effective and saves the government money in the long run.

"The homeless and service programs have gotten much more efficient in moving people out of homelessness than they once were… They produce good results over the long term," said Shamus Roller, executive director of the National Housing Law Project. "The main problem is that homelessness service agencies and Housing First is entirely [an] outflow strategy. What it does is take people who are on the street and move them out of the street, and the main issue that we have in the United States right now is that we have a massive inflow issue…The inflow of people who are ending up homeless is higher than the outflow."

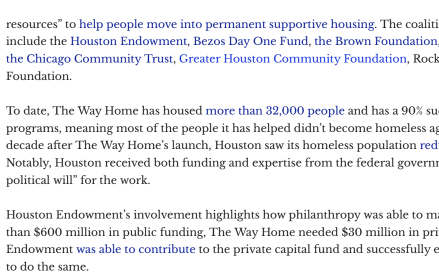
When it comes to that inflow, Roller said, the biggest drivers of homelessness aren't levels of drug use or mental illness, but rather, housing costs and income inequality.

"Say there are 10 people on a lifeboat and there are five life jackets. Five people put on life jackets. Five people don't. Five people survive. You wouldn't say the life jackets don't work. You would say there's not enough of them," said Jesse Rabinowitz, campaign and communications director of the National Homelessness Law Center (NHLC). "[Housing First] is incredibly effective. There's just not enough of it."

Funders address homelessness with cross-sector partnerships and impact investing

Private-public partnerships have been a cornerstone of local efforts to address homelessness — and the subject of growing funder interest before and after COVID. One benefit of these partnerships is that philanthropy can act more nimbly than government, at least in theory. In Los Angeles, for example, Mayor Karen Bass worked alongside philanthropic funders to launch LA4LA, a private-public partnership that is working to reduce homelessness in the city by opening up affordable housing options at both scale and speed.

Its first project, The Eaves, was completed last year and now serves as permanent supportive housing for people who were brought indoors through the city's Inside Safe program. LA4LA funders include California Community Foundation and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.



THE EAVES BUILDING, LOCATED IN THE KOREATOWN NEIGHBORHOOD OF LOS ANGELES. CREDIT: MARTHA RAMIREZ / INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

One of the most successful examples of how cross-sector collaboration can make significant progress can be found in Houston, Texas, where a cadre of philanthropic foundations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, the private sector and local counties and municipalities came together to form The Way Home.

The Way Home was launched in 2012 and is led by the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, which "acts as a catalyst, uniting partners and maximizing resources" to help people move into permanent supportive housing. The coalition's philanthropic backers include the Houston Endowment, Bezos Day One Fund, the Brown Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, Greater Houston Community Foundation, Rockwell Fund and the Powell Foundation.

To date, The Way Home has housed more than 32,000 people and has a 90% success rate with its housing programs, meaning most of the people it has helped didn't become homeless again within two years. In the decade after The Way Home's launch, Houston saw its homeless population reduced by 63% as of mid-2023. Notably, Houston received both funding and expertise from the federal government and had "exceptional political will" for the work.

Houston Endowment's involvement highlights how philanthropy was able to make a difference. To access more than $600 million in public funding, The Way Home needed $30 million in privately funded capital. Houston Endowment was able to contribute to the private capital fund and successfully encouraged its philanthropic peers to do the same.

The years before the pandemic also saw a growing interest in impact investing as another tool to tackle homelessness. Since then, there's been an increase in funders embracing this strategy. Last year, for instance, The California Endowment announced it was shifting its entire endowment toward impact investments.

Some of those investments have already been in affordable housing, including through Primestor, a developer that uses a community-centered approach to building affordable housing and retail, and Genesis LA, a community development financial institution.

Addressing extreme poverty by putting money in people's hands

The pandemic years also saw many funders test new approaches and solutions to tackle homelessness and extreme poverty, with direct cash aid being one of the most prominent. On the public side, there were federal and state stimulus payments. On the philanthropic side, there were a number of public-private collaboratives that experimented with one-time cash assistance and guaranteed income pilots.

For example, the Mayor's Fund for L.A. partnered with the city to launch a program that provided Angelenos with direct cash assistance in the form of prepaid debit cards to help cover basic needs. The Melville Charitable Trust also participated in a program that sought to prevent young people from becoming homeless in New York City by providing them with direct cash payments of $1,250 every month, made possible through a partnership supported by the New York mayor's office as well as private funders.

"The program was actually designed by young people with lived experience, along with the researchers," Melville's Hendrigan said. "So we're really trying to create a lot of evidence — and there's several other funders in the field doing this, as well — that direct cash works as a solution to keep folks in housing and to help them on their way to thrive."

Research has shown this type of aid was a major success. A report from the Robin Hood Foundation and Columbia University's Center on Poverty and Social Policy found that "direct cash payments were the single most useful tool for helping people ride out the pandemic" and "were, first and foremost, used to cover basic needs, including rent or mortgage payments, utilities and food."

"I think we learned some things during the pandemic…We were able to do some things that we didn't know we could," said Peter Laugharn, president and CEO of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, one of the biggest homelessness funders in the U.S. Laugharn pointed out that California's Project Roomkey was able to shelter and house around 62,000 people in two years — a feat which would have been unheard of in years prior. "So I think something positive came out of the pandemic, and we're still drawing the lessons from it."

Crucially, one of the biggest factors behind the increase in philanthropic funding during and after the pandemic was growing interest from funders who don't necessarily focus on homelessness but include it in their work, and from funders who typically don't fund homelessness, period.

"There [are] definitely more funders who are doing grantmaking around housing and homelessness who understand the importance of housing as part of their portfolio, even if they don't have a portfolio necessarily directed at homelessness. They understand that if they care about education, if they care about climate change, if they care about reforming the criminal legal system, that is all connected to housing," Andere said.

Confronting the root causes of homelessness

While some funders continue to take a more traditional approach to this work and focus their grantmaking on homeless shelters and other direct services, an increasing number of funders are also championing efforts to address the root causes of homelessness, which include a lack of affordable housing, low wages, systemic racism, lack of access to quality healthcare — including mental healthcare and pathways out of addiction — gender-based violence and domestic violence.

This is crucial because, as experts have noted, no matter how successful the efforts to directly help homeless individuals may be, the number of people becoming homeless is outpacing the number of people exiting homelessness.

"When you talk about, how do you solve homelessness for Joe, who's on the street right now? Well, we have a good answer for that, but when you talk about, how do you solve homelessness more generally, that's when you really do need to go upstream and say, well, we have to address these issues of housing availability, affordability and inequality," Henwood said. "And so that becomes much more difficult and most people haven't really wanted to get into that conversation, which needs to happen if we're ever going to address the homelessness problem."

While addiction is often seen as a major cause of homelessness, most experts do not see it as a root cause, though the two do intertwine and can aggravate one another. According to Addiction Center and American Addiction Centers, addiction is often the result of the stressors associated with homelessness and/or untreated mental illnesses.

The onset of the pandemic coincided with the racial justice uprisings that took place following George Floyd's murder, and as such, many funders began paying more attention to the intersection of racial injustice with a number of issues, including homelessness. The Melville Charitable Trust, for example, tightened its focus to populations that are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and housing insecurity.

"We believe all people should live with dignity and the data tells us that Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/x people with extremely low incomes face unfair barriers. We will continue to target our funding to those who need it most," Hendrigan said.

As the National Alliance to End Homelessness notes, the racial disparities among those experiencing homelessness stem from "long-standing historical and structural racism," including slavery, segregation, redlining and other forms of housing discrimination.

"Larger structural issues do need to be addressed because really what drives homelessness is issues around [the] availability of affordable housing, which gets into inequities that we see, and places with higher income and wealth inequality also have higher rates of homelessness. Of course, a lot of that is driven by structural racism and who gets resources and access to home ownership and who doesn't," Henwood said, adding that this helps account for the disproportionate numbers of people of color, particularly Black people, among the homeless population.

NHLC's Rabinowitz highlighted that while 45% of D.C.'s overall population is Black, about 90% of people experiencing homelessness in the city are Black.

Another grantmaking area that is gaining steam is funding for tenants' rights. While the struggle between tenants and landlords has been ongoing for centuries, more and more funders are expanding their grantmaking to support organizations that offer tenants' rights education, legal aid, advocacy, and perhaps most critically, are helping to fund tenant-led, community-based organizations to build power for renters.

The New York Community Trust, for example, has supported a variety of other tenants' rights and tenants' education initiatives, including the Neighborhoods First Fund, which backed organizations that successfully advocated for legislation to expand rental protections across the state, as well as good cause eviction protections in the city.

On the other side of the country, the Liberty Hill Foundation is part of the Stay Housed L.A. campaign, a partnership between the foundation, Los Angeles County, legal service providers and tenant-led community organizations that help tenants exercise their rights so they can continue living in their homes.

Changing narratives around homelessness and holding governments accountable

Perhaps one of the biggest changes in homelessness funding since COVID has been a growing emphasis on narrative change — a trend we've seen across philanthropy writ large. As advocates, experts and funders have all pointed out, one of the biggest issues when it comes to addressing homelessness is finding the public and political will to do so — and that has a lot to do with how people think about and talk about the issue.

"Homelessness is solvable, but it won't be achieved unless there's a fundamental shift in how homelessness is perceived, particularly around the causes of homelessness," said Jeanne Fekade-Sellassie, executive director of the Fund for Housing and Opportunity.

Grantmakers like the Melville Charitable Trust, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the Oak Foundation have all supported organizations working to change narratives around homelessness. Rather than placing the blame on an individual's decisions, funders want people to understand that homelessness is typically the result of systemic failures.

"More renters than ever [are] spending more than half of their incomes on rent. [Homelessness] is partly a problem of not enough housing that's affordable for people with low incomes, but also, I think it's a failure of multiple systems," Fekade-Sellassie said. "Once someone loses a job, gets a divorce, has a health emergency, the social supports and the community care — including government supports — are not there to help people when they find themselves in a situation where they have a financial hiccup."

The Fund for Housing and Opportunity counts narrative change as one of its main priority areas and has supported a number of related grantees. The grantmaking collaborative works to protect renters and end homelessness and its steering committee members include the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ballmer Group, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, Melville Charitable Trust and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Funders are also working to address the lack of accountability and governance around tackling homelessness — particularly in places where large amounts of public money have been allocated to the problem. Last year, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors launched the Leadership Table for Regional Homeless Alignment. Made up of representatives from different regions and sectors, the aim is to improve the development and implementation of homelessness strategies in Los Angeles.

The effort was made possible thanks to the efforts of two philanthropic leaders. "Peter Laugharn from the Hilton Foundation and I have been working now for three years on trying to create much more coordinated and accountable systems of governance … between the cities and the county, so that there's one plan [and] there's alignment in strategies and goals that are being set," said Miguel A. Santana, president and CEO of the California Community Foundation. Laugharn and Santana co-chair the Leadership Table.

Laugharn said the Leadership Table is a way for civic leaders to essentially lock arms with the city, the county and the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA) to ensure progress is made on homelessness. This comes at a time when LAHSA has come under fire for being "vulnerable to waste and fraud."

"I think the rest of us should also act as though we're living in a state of emergency and say, 'What can we do to advance things?' I'm thinking [the] private sector, philanthropy, also labor, the faith community — a whole lot of constituencies that should not be leaning against the wall and saying, 'I wonder how this is going to turn out,' but actually putting their shoulder to it together," Laugharn said.

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Funders navigate setbacks to progress on homelessness

Approaches to alleviating and even ending homelessness that grew more popular through the pandemic years still form the core of how philanthropic funders are responding — but they've been subject to setbacks, from the federal level on down.

Last June, for instance, the Supreme Court issued its ruling in the case of *Grants Pass v. Johnson*, finding that enforcing laws regulating camping on public property does not constitute "cruel and unusual punishment" as prohibited by the Eighth Amendment, thus opening the door for the further criminalization of homelessness. Under the ruling, law enforcement officials will be allowed to fine, ticket and even arrest people for sleeping outdoors.

Andere called the ruling a "demoralizing factor," and pointed out how states and local communities have used the decision to enact policies that funders believe will hurt those experiencing homelessness. Not long after the court issued its ruling, California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order to remove homeless encampments and urged cities to do the same, adding that he could take away funding from those whom he feels did not do enough to address the issue.

Since the *Grants Pass* decision, at least 150 cities in 32 states have passed laws criminalizing homelessness across the U.S.

"There is a desire to frame people who are experiencing homelessness as threats rather than human, so that, over time, really paved the way for laws that penalize folks that are experiencing homelessness," Fekade-Sellassie said.

The last few years have also highlighted racial disparities in how people recovered from the pandemic, but there, too, progress appears to be in danger given the increasing pushback against racial justice, especially from the Trump administration. "There was an uptick in funding for racial justice as it related to housing during and immediately after the pandemic. Some funders are continuing to support that in the public housing work, but I think others are pulling away from one-time commitments that they've made," Fekade-Sellassie said.

In addition, many pandemic-era protections, including the temporary moratorium on evictions and emergency rental assistance programs, have ended. Other financial assistance, such as the American Rescue Plan's Child Tax Credit expansion and stimulus payments, have also expired. This, combined with spiking housing costs, inflation and price gouging, have made things all the more difficult and may explain why national homelessness levels increased in 2023 and 2024.

To address this, The New York Community Trust, noting that the protections put in place during the pandemic made a big difference in lifting people out of poverty or keeping them from falling further into it, has sought to support the advocates and organizations who are working to make those protections permanent, said Chantella Mitchell, director of the Trust's Community Development, Housing and Human Services program.

"A large majority of the funding that happens in local communities and even nationally, outside of advocacy, is directed by public funds, whether that's federal or local dollars," said Andere of Funders Together for Housing Justice. "We saw [during] the pandemic a huge influx of federal dollars that helped in rental assistance, that helped in prevention funds, and so those dollars are starting to dry up… We do see that impact on communities."

Even the greater Houston area, which, as noted earlier, has made significant progress on reducing homelessness, is starting to feel the strain. The Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, the organization that leads The Way Home, estimates that with the loss of the federal pandemic funds, an additional $50 million per year will be necessary to sustain the resources it provides and avoid an increase in homelessness in the region, according to Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research. The coalition estimates that around 5,200 formerly homeless people could become homeless again by the end of 2026 without the funding.

When considering the future of homelessness funding, it's also impossible to ignore the effects of growing conservative pushback against proven approaches like Housing First, which gained steam in the Bush era and until very recently had bipartisan support. There's also the question of how Donald Trump's second presidency will impact homelessness moving forward.

Project 2025's section on the Department for Housing and Urban Development, for example, calls for an end to Housing First policies and for a return to providing housing for people only after they have addressed personal issues like mental health and drug addiction.

Already, we've seen the Trump administration gutting homelessness services and shifting policy away from Housing First. In an executive order issued on March 14, Trump ordered the dismantling of USICH, which coordinates the federal response to homelessness.

The Trump administration has also proposed cutting almost $33 billion from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, including $532 million for homelessness assistance and $26.7 billion of HUD's rental assistance funding. Rental assistance programs would be consolidated and restructured, and a two-year limit on assistance for able-bodied, nonelderly adults would be imposed. According to AP News, if these changes were to go through, as many as 1.4 million households could lose their public housing subsidies and vouchers from the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

"The Trump administration is going to make this problem worse at every single level. They're going to make discrimination in the housing market worse. The federal housing programs that exist are… going to have less money, and they're not going to work as well for the next few years," said Roller at the National Housing Law Project. "And it will likely take years for federal agencies to recover from the loss of human infrastructure."

Rabinowitz at the National Homelessness Law Center said that the Trump administration will further aggravate the housing crisis by making building more expensive. Trump's mass deportations will lead to labor shortages, and tariffs will drive up the cost of materials, especially lumber. In addition, cuts to Social Security, Medicaid, SNAP and other social safety nets will push more people into homelessness.

Given uncertainty around ongoing federal cuts and the fact that the reduction of federal funding and the end of pandemic-era protections was one of the biggest factors in the rise in homelessness since the pandemic, it seems philanthropy's role in addressing homelessness will become even more important than it already is.

Outlook: Can philanthropy really "solve" homelessness?

Despite recent setbacks, there are still a number of bright spots. The National Homelessness Law Center and National Coalition for the Homeless' Housing Not Handcuffs campaign has helped defeat at least 29 bills in 14 states that sought to criminalize homelessness.

Roller added that the National Housing Law Project will be litigating and working alongside its partners to keep federal programs alive, protect tenants and to push the federal government to do its job over the next four years.

One particularly positive development is that the pandemic showed that progress is possible. Being able to halt a rise in homelessness at a time when so many people were losing their jobs and dealing with serious illness was a major accomplishment.

Efforts in Los Angeles appear to be working. For the second year in a row, homelessness in Los Angeles has decreased. In Los Angeles County, homelessness fell by 4%, and in the City of Los Angeles, it fell by 3.4%. Unsheltered homelessness decreased across the county by 9.5%, and in the city by 7.9%.

"The solution to homelessness hasn't really changed," Melville's Hendrigan said. "It's housing and services for folks, and just as financial winds change, the solution becomes less popular or more popular, but we really need to invest as a country in housing and homelessness solutions for folks and commit to that."

Andere noted that although recent setbacks don't inspire optimism, funders remain willing and determined and believe that homelessness can be solved when people work on evidence-based solutions.

"I feel hopeful because I think the conversation has shifted toward thinking about affordability," said Mitchell of the New York Community Trust. "I feel optimistic because the conversation is shifting to the systemic barriers to ending homelessness… I think now we're in a good place where public officials can actually take the really good information and the really good models that a lot of these nonprofits have developed and have been working on and put them into action."

Rabinowitz was also optimistic about state and local progress. "Cities and states across the country are solving homelessness every day. People are getting connected to the housing and supportive services that we know work."

However, Rabinowitz also noted that many of the organizations engaging in this work, including his own, operate on shoestring budgets. "We need resources," he said. "We really need philanthropy to step up and help tip the scales. We're never going to have as much money as billionaires — and we don't need to because we have truth, we have empathy, we have compassion and kindness. But right now, the scales are so out of whack that we really need some help to level the playing field."

As intractable as homelessness may seem, the pandemic, along with decades' worth of innovation, have provided a blueprint for how the U.S. can address the issue and, in time, even solve it. However, homelessness — and housing more broadly — are also areas where philanthropy's toolbox is likely too limited, and its resources too constrained, to achieve that on its own.

But that doesn't mean funders shouldn't keep doing what they do best: testing new approaches, engaging in public-private partnerships, and funding the organizations that are working on the issue — while also pushing for a significant increase in resources from government to address the systemic issues that have led to and continue to perpetuate the problem.

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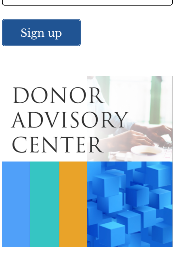

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