

We Know What's Missing from Homeless Services

By [Dr. Seth Pickens](#)

The homelessness services sector in Los Angeles—and across the country—is facing a quiet but urgent crisis. We see it on our streets, in encampments, and in the growing despair etched into the faces of those without stable shelter.

But the crisis isn't only about the people we serve. It's also about the people doing the serving.

The frontline workforce—case managers, peer specialists, housing navigators, property managers, clinicians, and countless advocates and unsung community heroes—is stretched to its breaking point. Caseloads are unmanageable. Communication is fragmented. Staff turnover routinely exceeds 30% in many programs, driven by burnout, moral injury, and a sense of powerlessness inside the very systems meant to restore dignity.

This isn't a critique of individuals. It's a reflection of systems that lack coherence, collaboration, and trust. When service providers feel unsupported, clients notice. When teams don't talk, people fall through the cracks. When the culture is reactive versus reflective, no amount of funding can fix the churn.

And yet, even in this storm, bright spots shine through.

We see them in the case manager who refuses to give up on a client others have labeled “noncompliant.” In non-profit executives increasing staff productivity and satisfaction by normalizing cultures that prioritize well being. In the program leaders who take risks, test new ideas, and center healing—not just housing.

What these moments have in common is not a checklist or a policy mandate. It's a mindset: a belief in the possibility of flourishing.

The USC Homelessness Policy Research Institute (HPRI) has grounded parts of its work in a person-centered approach—listening deeply to service providers, tenants, public sector leaders, researchers, and community partners. This commitment has revealed that what's needed goes beyond program improvements: it requires a deeper cultural transformation in how homelessness services are conceived and carried out.

This has led to the development of a framework for flourishing—implementing policies and practices that promote wellness, resilience, and thriving for individuals and communities. It's about restoring humanity to a system that often feels cold and chaotic. And it's about giving providers and participants alike the tools and language to build healthier relationships, teams, and outcomes.

The framework centers five core principles:

1. **Collaboration** – Fostering shared ownership and deeper connection across roles and organizations
2. **Accountability** – Creating clarity, feedback loops, and healthy expectations
3. **Innovation** – Encouraging adaptation, learning, and experimentation in real time
4. **Trust** – Building psychological safety, not just enforcing compliance
5. **Mindfulness** – Bringing presence, reflection, and purpose back into the work

These aren't abstract values—they're deeply practical. When applied through leadership training, team huddles, policy reviews, and every day service delivery, the results are tangible. Staff feel seen and supported. Property managers and case workers start working together instead of at odds. Residents feel respected—and that makes all the difference.

In piloting this framework with partners in supportive housing, we've found that even simple shifts—like team reflection rituals, shared space assessments, and co-created community agreements—can interrupt burnout and reignite purpose.

And we believe this approach can scale.

That's why, on **September 11, 2025**, HPRI will host the **first USC Flourishing and Empowerment Summit**, focused entirely on the question: *What would it take for everyone in the homelessness response system to flourish?*

The summit will bring together service providers, researchers, funders, policymakers, people with lived experience, and civic leaders to explore how we embed flourishing into policy, practice, and everyday relationships. It's a gathering of possibility—and a bold call to shift the culture of care.

This conversation is especially urgent now. Across the country, we are witnessing a period of political polarization, economic tightening, and growing disillusionment with government-led solutions. In many jurisdictions, including California, housing budgets are being cut or reallocated. Agencies are being asked to do more with less—often without the cultural infrastructure to support such a task.

A flourishing framework is not about adding more work. It's about making the work work better—for everyone involved. It honors what frontline teams already know: healing is relational. Transformation is cultural. And dignity is not a bonus—it's the baseline.

It's time to stop normalizing burnout, fragmentation, and hopelessness in a system meant to offer restoration. This isn't just about more housing—it's about more humanity.

Let's build that together.

The Homelessness Policy Research Institute is a joint research center of the USC Suzanne Dworak Peck School of Social Work and the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy. Led by Dr. Ben Henwood (Faculty Director) and Dr. Seth Pickens (Managing Director), HPRI connects researchers, policymakers, funders, service providers, and people with lived experience to

accelerate equitable and effective solutions to homelessness in Los Angeles County through collaborative research and data-driven policy.