



Expert Brief: Alaska's Efforts to Prevent and End Homelessness

Presenters

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Our Community

Alaska, which is geographically larger than Texas, California, and Montana combined, has a population of 737,080, with 40% of the population living in the Municipality of Anchorage. Vast distances separate communities in Alaska, and many are not accessible by road. Each region across the state has different community governance, geography, climate, and population dynamics. There are rainforests in southeast Alaska, windswept barren mountains in the Aleutian Islands, and frigid deserts in the Arctic—with everything else in between.

Most of the limited services that are available to address or prevent homelessness are in urban centers, namely Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, and are difficult and costly to access from other communities. There are 237 Tribally-Designated Housing Entities (TDHEs) that receive Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG) funding to deliver housing services to the most remote communities in the country, with Regional Housing Authorities serving as the TDHEs for 196 Tribes in Alaska.

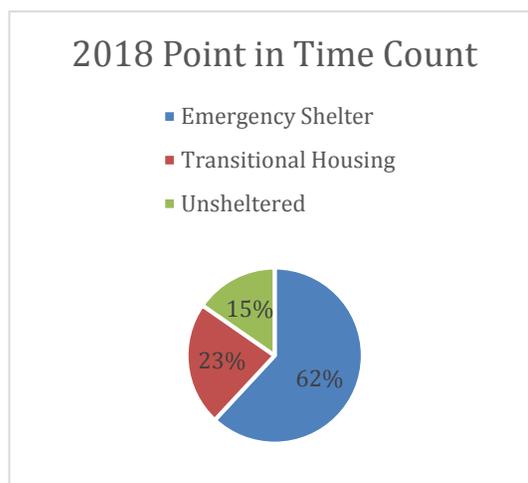
Although Alaska is very diverse, the barriers to constructing safe, sanitary, and affordable housing or shelter are replicated across the state and rooted in a lack of basic infrastructure, which has a disproportionate impact on Alaska Natives and results in severe overcrowding in rural Alaska. A large

containing quarterly aggregate level information detailing client demographics, HUD’s System Performance Measurements, and service utilization.¹ Communities use these resources in their strategic planning processes, and both coalitions are now able to allocate resources from a more informed vantage point when managing state funding competitions. Although these are some of the state’s significant achievements, Alaska still has more work to do before it can fully address these larger housing challenges.

Our Challenges

Who is Experiencing Homelessness in Alaska?

Understanding the housing and homelessness challenges in Alaska is difficult because the causes are varied and there are often barriers to implementing prescriptive measures. The most recent Point-in-Time count identified 2,016 individuals experiencing homelessness, which is a 9.3% increase from the previous year’s totals. It’s important to note that this is an undercount due to the size of the state, the complexity of conducting a statewide count, and the fact that the number of people experiencing homelessness increases significantly in the summer months due to the large number of seasonal employment-seekers in our tourism and fishing industries who either cannot find affordable housing or cannot find employment.



AKCH2 also analyzes quarter-to-quarter aggregate HMIS data to monitor system performance. According to our data from the first quarter of 2018, a total of 4,806 individuals—one-third of whom

Q1 2018 Data on Individuals Accessing Services	
Male	65%
Chronically Homeless	22%
Veterans	11%
Disabled	42%

were new clients who had not accessed services in the past—were served by Alaskan homelessness services programs. Alaska Natives are disproportionately represented among those experiencing homelessness, making up 46% of those accessing services this quarter, despite only comprising 15% of the state’s population.

Current Housing Interventions and Challenges in Service Delivery

Our urban centers contain the most housing intervention beds on average compared to more rural areas, but it is important to note that Alaska has a network of shelters for survivors of domestic violence scattered throughout the state. In vast regions of Alaska, there are literally no existing beds for individuals experiencing homelessness that are not dedicated to survivors of domestic violence. This poses an incredible challenge for people experiencing homelessness in rural communities who are living hundreds of miles away from the closest services without a transportation system connecting them.

¹ Data dashboards can be found on the AKCH2 website: www.alaskahousing-homeless.org/data.

We have established numerous points of access for clients throughout the state that offer phone-based vulnerability assessments. Individuals are ranked by vulnerability, and when a bed or housing voucher becomes available, the most vulnerable individual assessed as appropriate for the housing intervention will be first in line for a referral. However, individuals must cover their own transportation costs, which are often more than \$1,000, making it likely that engaging with the system actually leaves them with very little hope of improving their housing outcome.

Overcrowding and Inadequate Housing Stock in Rural Alaska

A recently completed national assessment of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and Hawaiian housing needs conducted by HUD found that overcrowding issues in tribal areas are mostly due to households taking in family members who would otherwise be homeless.

Overcrowding is a result of the lack of affordable housing and housing stock and substandard housing in our communities. In the HUD American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) housing study, it was reported that Alaska had the worst physical housing conditions, with 36% of units surveyed having some type of physical problem.

A primary factor driving the lack of affordable housing in our communities is the cost of construction and the cost of transporting construction materials, which can be 30-50% of the cost of a home. In Alaska, it is common for total development costs for construction to have quadrupled since 1999.

2018 Alaska Housing Finance Corporation Estimates	
Units Needed to Alleviate Overcrowding	16,100
Units Lacking Plumbing and/or Kitchens	12,600

Infrastructure and Health

In addition to the shipping expenses that increase the cost of construction, a number of communities in Alaska lack basic infrastructure, including running water and indoor plumbing. These communities are mainly located in western Alaska and along the Yukon River and its tributaries. The lack of in-home water and sewer service causes severe skin infections and respiratory illnesses, but it is important to note that the Indian Health Service funding cannot provide infrastructure service (water and wastewater) to HUD-funded projects/homes. This service is put upon the Tribe or TDHE, and is not included in the total development costs of housing. The health implications are apparent in the Calista region, part of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region in southwest Alaska, where individuals suffer rates of invasive pneumococcal disease that are among the highest in the world. Respiratory diseases are responsible for two-thirds of child hospitalization in rural Alaska.

Funding

Tribes and TDHEs have become more sophisticated in leveraging funds to develop projects with multi-layered funding sources. However, the core housing needs in Indian Country simply cannot be met adequately without additional funding secured for the IHBG program. **In Alaska, and across all of Indian Country, IHBG-funded programs are the primary vehicle for meeting critical housing needs.** The Native American Housing and Self Determination Act (NAHASDA) continues to be grossly underfunded, due to

general inflation, overall increased costs of construction, and population growth.² The Indian Housing Block Grant should account for these factors and be increased to provide adequate funding to develop affordable housing in Alaska and across Indian country.

Our Recommendations

We have the following recommendations and observations for USICH and the Council, and we look forward to working with USICH member agencies, staff, partners, and stakeholders to fully understand how your work can effectively include programs, services, and support for rural Alaska.

Ending Veteran Homelessness

1. Include Tribal HUD-VASH as a permanent funding source to end Veteran homelessness. It has taken a long time for this pilot program to materialize due to stringent qualifications for case managers and the availability of these individuals in rural communities. This has been compounded by the slow speed of our local VA and their hiring procedures.
2. Ensure case management services are accessible to Veterans living in rural communities, which may require innovation, such as remote delivery as is done with telemedicine. Alaska's Veterans Affairs was not able to recruit a Master's-level case manager to live and work in Bethel, and was not able to innovate with traveling case management, tele-delivery, or contract with the health corporation.

Ending Chronic Homelessness

3. Increase Housing First education and outreach to rural communities. For example:
 - Develop case studies on collaboration between Public Housing Agencies and rural communities using scattered site and congregate permanent supportive housing (e.g., 6-12-unit scaling/production).
 - Provide examples of financing structures for rural communities, such as how-to guides for mainstream programs to create housing units in rural areas using the Community Development Block Grant program, Housing Choice Vouchers, Indian Housing Block Grant, and/or the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit.

Engaging Private Partners

4. Identify and reduce barriers for public/private partnerships in under-resourced communities. Due to low economies of scale and high cost of development there is a need to incentivize private investments in rural communities.

Addressing Severe Overcrowding

5. Develop strategies and funding opportunities that address the scale of overcrowding experienced in rural Alaska.

² HUD's Housing Needs of American Indian and Alaska Natives in Tribal Areas Report noted that "Congress has provided a fairly consistent level of funding for the IHBG in nominal terms, but this flow has been seriously eroded by inflation."

6. The current “severely overcrowded” definition falls short of what many villages are experiencing. Consider creating additional definitions that match the scale of the problem.
7. Prioritize funding to address overcrowding by the scale of the situation and total development cost.

Addressing High Costs of Rural Development

8. Maintain, and retain, bypass mail to keep shipping costs low.
9. Consider creating specific shipping subsidies for affordable housing building materials.
10. Create tax credit programs for rural transportation, like airlines, ferries, and barges.
11. Increase the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit funding and allocation to Alaska.

Addressing the Intersection of the Opioid Crisis and Homelessness

12. Engage Indian Health Service to integrate the connection between housing and health care to have the health care system invest in affordable housing.
13. Address the lack of detox beds and/or treatment facilities in our rural communities.

In closing, you can hear our stories, read the literature, and have an understanding of the conditions in our communities, but we urge you to visit our Rural Villages to see the impact that overcrowding and substandard housing conditions have on our people. **We should classify these conditions and experiences as homelessness in Alaska.** Visit our communities, witness their challenges and their successes, and see how policies that are crafted by the departments that you administer can be changed or enhanced to serve our most vulnerable populations.