

NON-NEGOTIABLE #1

Housing First

THE RIGHT TO SHELTER



The housing crisis in America has reached unprecedented levels. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) [2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report](#), 771,480 Americans—approximately 23 per 10,000 people—are experiencing homelessness, an 18% increase from the previous year.

“Our worsening national affordable housing crisis, rising inflation, stagnating wages among middle- and lower-income households, and the persisting effects of systemic racism have stretched homelessness services systems to their limits,” HUD wrote in its report.

Family homelessness rose by a staggering 39%, with nearly 150,000 children without stable housing.

These numbers, alarming as they are, likely underrepresent the true scale of the crisis, as point-in-time counts miss many individuals temporarily staying with friends or family, living in motels, or sleeping in places not visible to counters.

The solution to this national shame lies in the [Housing First model](#), pioneered by Dr. Sam Tsemberis in New York City in 1992.

Unlike traditional “treatment first” approaches that required people to meet various prerequisites (such as sobriety or employment) before receiving housing assistance, Housing First operates on a fundamentally different principle: provide stable housing immediately, then address other issues like unemployment, mental health challenges, or substance use disorders.

Critics often mischaracterize Housing First as “Housing Only,” but this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the approach.

Housing First means exactly that—housing as the first intervention, not the only one. The evidence supporting this approach is overwhelming. Studies consistently show that 85-90% of participants remain housed after their first year in the program, and 75-80% maintain their housing after five years. [This approach stands in stark contrast to traditional treatment-first alternatives](#), which typically see retention rates of only 30-40%.

The financial impact is equally impressive. Research across multiple cities shows [average savings of \\$10,000-\\$20,000 per person annually through Housing First](#) programs compared to the status quo.

Such savings stem from reduced use of emergency services, lower incarceration rates, and decreased need for crisis intervention. In addition, emergency room visits drop by an average of 40% among participants, while overall health outcomes and quality of life metrics show significant improvements.

Conservative narratives about homelessness often focus on individual choices and personal responsibility, pointing to mental illness and substance use as primary causes. This framework fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between housing insecurity and personal challenges.

The reality is that housing instability often precedes and [exacerbates mental health](#) and substance use issues rather than the other way around. Living on the streets is traumatic, and trauma can lead to or worsen mental health problems and substance use.

The true drivers of America's homelessness crisis are structural: a severe shortage of affordable housing, stagnant wages combined with rising housing costs, inadequate social safety nets, and the increasing treatment of housing as an investment vehicle rather than a basic need. These are features of capitalism that turn into societal failures when the proper protections are removed.

The human cost of homelessness is immeasurable—the trauma, lost potential, and shortened lives cannot be adequately quantified. But even in purely financial terms, our current approach is remarkably expensive. Studies consistently show that chronic homelessness costs taxpayers more in emergency services, healthcare, and law enforcement than providing permanent housing would.

As we face several gathering storms—climate change displacement, an aging population on fixed incomes, potential mass job losses due to AI, and an administration that will likely contribute to widening inequality—making universal shelter a Non-Negotiable rallying point is essential.

Housing First represents not just a more humane approach to homelessness but a more effective and economically sound one as well. It serves as the foundation upon which our other Non-Negotiables can be built—after all, without stable shelter, how can one engage meaningfully with work, healthcare, civic participation, or climate action?