LSE THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Home   Explore the States   Policy Case Studies   About

California
Homelessness

California's 'Project Roomkey' is a novel large-scale approach to homelessness relief but has seen mixed success.

10/05/2022

USEFULNESS

◉ 1

◈ 0

💬 0

☆

Abstract

As part of California's pandemic response, Project Roomkey began in March 2020, to provide the state's homeless population with emergency short-term housing via hotels/motels, if exposed or at high-risk of complications due to Covid-19. The program also serves as a route to more permanent, long-term shelter, but neither goal has seen significant success.

State: Topic: Level:
California   **Homelessness**   **State**

Problem

Early on, the Covid-19 pandemic was <u>recognised as a catastrophe for</u> the country's homeless population. The largest in the United States , California's homeless population (<u>over 160000</u> individuals, as of 2020) constituted an especially vulnerable demographic. Crowded shelters would be easy points of contagion and there was a lack of access to quarantine and self-isolation shelter, as well as difficulties accessing clean water, soap, and other basic hygiene.

Solution Approach

At the same time, economic shutdown and travel bans at the start of the pandemic left a large number of hotel rooms vacant and available to mass-rent at lower costs. These were <u>put forward</u> as safer alternatives to group (known as congregate) shelters, enabling individuals to be sheltered in separate rooms and limiting the spread of Covid-19. The <u>guideline criteria</u> for those who would be eligible for participation in the scheme – alongside the baseline requirement that they were experiencing homelessness – included:

- "Individuals who test positive for COVID-19 that do not require hospitalization, but need isolation or quarantine;

- Individuals who have been exposed to COVID-19 (as documented by a state or local public health official, or medical health professional) that do not require hospitalization, but need isolation or quarantine; and

- Individuals who are asymptomatic, but are at "high-risk," such as people over 65 or who have certain underlying health conditions and who require Emergency NCS [non-congregate sheltering] as a social distancing measure."

Solution Implementation

While federally funded and state-supported, implementation took place primarily through counties. Fifty five counties in California participated in the program.

With an initial $150 million in state funding (in March 2020), local and tribal governments worked to identify hotels, motels, and other sites that could be used as non-congregate homeless shelter, and then secure operating agreements with owners. Eligibility screening was conducted at a local level, as was transportation and relocation of resident participants.

Buffer

On-site support provided included laundry, sanitation, trauma care, mental health and harm reduction services, access to case workers, and more, but this varied dramatically by county.

Impact and Effectiveness

The program was effective in providing access to medical services for especially vulnerable demographics, and demonstrated how quickly shelter capacity could be increased in times of emergency. The pool of participants tended to report physical and mental conditions at a level higher than in the average population, many of whom did not receive stable access to medical care in group shelters.

If viewed solely as an emergency response and a short-term response to the pandemic, Project Roomkey was thus reasonably successful in its aims. As of August 2021, the project "had helped 42000 people".

However, county-wise implementation created inequity in both the success and reach of the program. Rates of participation varied by as much as 20% of the homeless population in San Francisco county, as compared to under 5% in San Diego county and under 10% in the other five counties with the highest homeless populations. One-off provision of state funds left poorer counties reluctant to continue the program, as their own funding was not sufficient.

In terms of its success in facilitating long-term shelter, Project Roomkey has made little headway. Only 5% of those who temporarily inhabited the hotels had found permanent housing half a year into the scheme. Analysing 36 of the 55 participating counties, *The Desert Sun* reported that "16% returned to homelessness, 40% are still in a hotel room but could face eviction come the new year, and 39% left the program but caseworkers don't know where they went". For instance, in Los Angeles County, over 1200 participants in the program (out of approximately 9000 totally) are waiting to be transitioned to a permanent home, over 18 months later. Project Homekey, built to succeed Project Roomkey, aims to construct and/or renovate a variety of permanent housing units for the target homeless population, but its impact remains to be seen.

It is also important to note the program's financial cost (estimated to be around $260 per participant per night), is significantly above that of congregate shelter provision. This is a major factor in its long-term weaknesses; a lack of or reduction in funding post-pandemic could lead to sudden evictions and a return to homelessness for Project Roomkey's resident participants.

Further reading/supporting links

- *California's 'magic recipe' for reducing homelessness, Politico.* https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/0

4/main-recoverylab-cities-la-sros-518602

- Project Roomkey Fell Short Of Expectations In LA County, Experts Say, CBS News, https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/project-roomkey-fell-short-of-expectations-in-la-county-experts-say/

- What is Project Roomkey? Echo Park's Homeless Residents Being Offered Temporary Shelter, Newsweek, https://www.newsweek.com/what-project-roomkey-1578646

- Residents Blast L.A. County Initiative of Sheltering Homeless in Nearby Hotels During Pandemic, Newsweek, https://www.newsweek.com/california-residents-blast-l-county-initiative-sheltering-homeless-nearby-hotels-during-pandemic-1504649

- Donesky, D., Norton, L., Fisher, E. and Bunker-Alberts, M. (2021). Health services and the Project RoomKey COVID-19 initiative for the unhoused: A university and community partnership. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, [online] 37(6), pp.1175–1179. doi:10.1016/j.profnurs.2021.10.008, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8552694/

- California's Hotels Transformed Into Housing for the Homeless During the Pandemic, Architizer, https://architizer.com/blog/inspiration/stories/california-homeless-housing-project-roomkey/

https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/project-roomkey-fell-short-of-expectations-in-la-county-experts-say/

https://www.newsweek.com/what-project-roomkey-1578646

https://www.newsweek.com/california-residents-blast-l-county-initiative-sheltering-homeless-nearby-hotels-during-pandemic-1504649

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8552694/

https://architizer.com/blog/inspiration/stories/california-homeless-housing-project-roomkey/

Written by

The author has set their contact details to private.

Supporting Links

|	
San José Council Approves Modest Shift Toward Temporary Homeless Housing	KQED ↗
San José's city council moves closer to an agreement on how to spend money dedicated to reducing homelessness - 24 May 2023	KQED ↗
Policing Doesn't End Homelessness. Supportive Housing Does.	Housing Matters, the Urban Institute ↗
How Houston Moved 25,000 People From the Streets Into Homes of Their	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/14/headway/houston-homeless-people.html ↗

Related Case Studies

TEXAS
Homelessness
10/05/2022

Houston, Texas, has seen a 63% fall in homelessness over the past decade, with a rate of progress significantly above the rest of the country.

PENNSYLVANIA
Homelessness
08/13/2021

Homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing programs in Philadelphia have led to a 25 percent decline in family homelessness since 2017, with uneven results in meeting broader need.
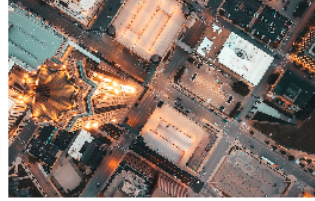
IOWA
Homelessness
08/13/2021

Des Moines, Iowa committed to ending veteran homelessness in 2014, using data to meet its goal in just fourteen months.
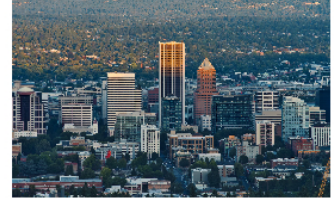
OREGON
Homelessness
08/13/2021

In Oregon, Project Turnkey has allocated $65 million of funding to respond to accommodation pressures worsened by the pandemic and wildfires, so far creating 300 accommodation units.

Submit a policy case study

The State of the States is built on the case study contributions of policymakers and policy experts like you. It's easy to contribute - click below to find out more.

GET STARTED