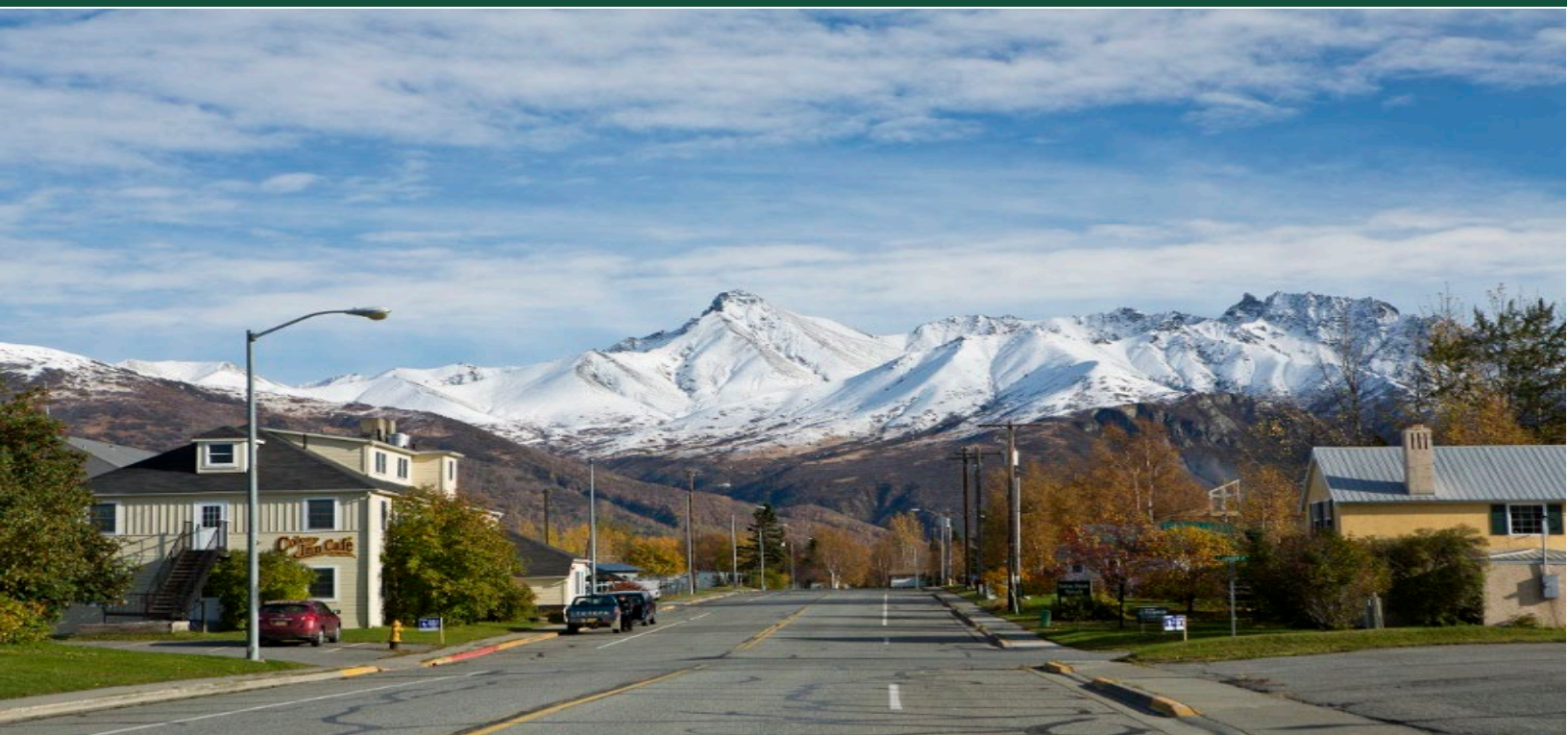




MAT-SU HEALTH
FOUNDATION

Mat-Su Homelessness Needs Assessment

Summary Report, February 2022



Prepared by Agnew::Beck Consulting for the Mat-Su Health Foundation

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the Mat-Su residents, organizations and partners who participated in this process (in alphabetical order):

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Land Acknowledgement

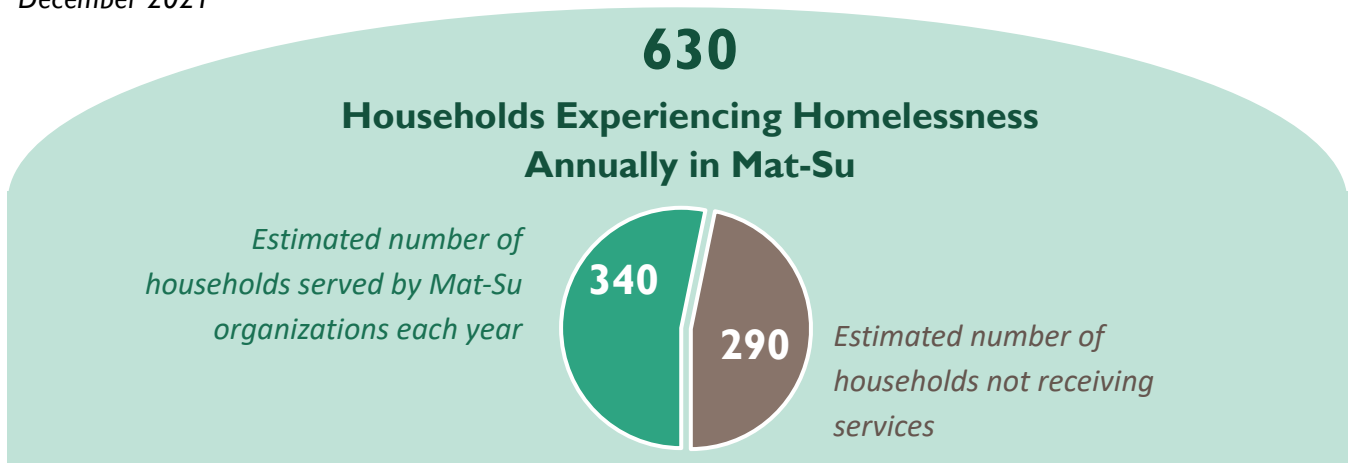
We acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the Dena'ina and Ahtna peoples.

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Mat-Su Homelessness Needs Assessment: Executive Summary

December 2021



Recommendations

Improve the System	1. Re-design the Partnership and Develop a Strategic Plan to End Homelessness	2. Convene Private, Nonprofit and Government Funders to Develop a Funding Plan	3. Increase Data Integration Among Providers
	1. Improve Access for Those Seeking Help	2. Expand Diversion so Fewer People Become Homeless	3. Invest in Supportive Housing
			4. Convene Housing Developers and Property Owners

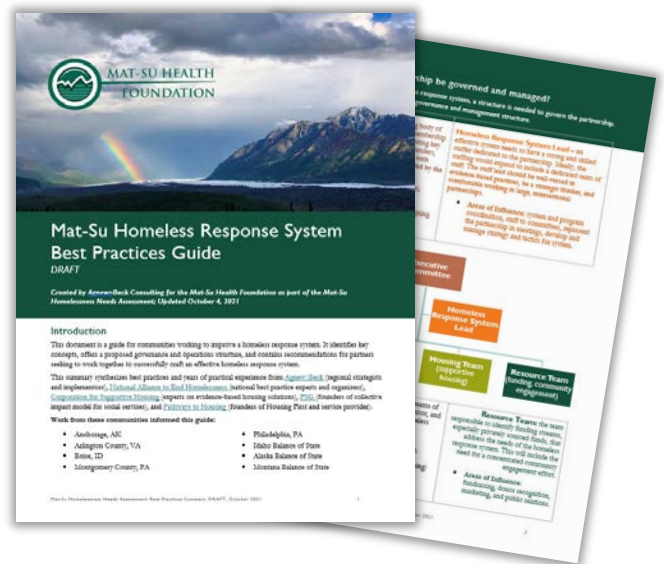
About this Report



This brief report offers a summary of the process, key findings and recommendations from the Mat-Su Homelessness Needs Assessment.



The report is accompanied by a comprehensive set of slides with additional information on the planning process, relevant data and community feedback. It also includes a set of best practices for crafting an effective community response to homelessness, detailed findings from the gaps model and focus group polling results.



I. Introduction

Project Purpose

In Spring of 2021, the Mat-Su Health Foundation hired Agnew::Beck Consulting to conduct a homelessness needs assessment for the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

Objectives

- **Better understand the trends and extent of homelessness in Mat-Su** | Due to the expansive geography and limited infrastructure of the Mat-Su Borough, homelessness looks different than it does in more urban settings. It might not take the form of someone panhandling on a busy street corner, or people gathering outside of an emergency shelter. It could be a combat veteran camping in the woods, far out of sight or mind of most residents. It could be a family living out of their car, or someone couch-surfing through a winter. Through this project, we developed an estimate of the population of people experiencing homelessness and broke them down into subcategories to better understand the scale of the problem.
- **Prepare a gaps model** | With this estimated population, we were able to analyze the current homelessness response system in comparison. The goal was to answer the question: is the capacity to house people experiencing homelessness meeting the demand for homeless services in Mat-Su? We found areas of insufficient services as well as an area that exceeded needs.
- **Reach out to stakeholders to gather perspectives** | We talked with providers directly serving the homeless population, as well as those more on the fringes, such as transportation providers and educators. We also talked with people with lived experience. In each conversation we asked about the efficacy of the current system to identify needs and areas for improvement.
- **Compile findings and share recommendations** | The end result is a proposed framework to address homelessness in Mat-Su. We developed three recommendations to improve the system, which largely center around better coordination between providers. We developed four recommendations to fill the gaps in the response system. These recommendations aim to bolster diversion; build an intake, assessment and referral system; and increase supportive housing capacity.

While this plan was commissioned by the Mat-Su Health Foundation, it is intended to be a communitywide resource that can only be fully utilized when all providers, funders, governments and community leaders work together to address homelessness in the Mat-Su.

Experiences of Homelessness in Mat-Su

From interviews with individuals who have experienced homelessness in Mat-Su

“I just found out I qualified for a voucher. I am excited and terrified to have my own place. I’m excited to get off the streets, to set my own schedule. Having control of my space will be a treasure. I’m terrified because I have alcohol and drug addiction and go through periods of sobriety and relapse.”

“I came out to Mat-Su to escape a bad domestic violence situation in Anchorage. Everything and everyone has been so helpful. Childcare has been an issue – I don’t have a job, and it’s hard to participate in job interviews if I have my kid with me.”

“I finally got sober from a heroin addiction... My pregnancy was motivation to get sober. But once COVID-19 hit, I was struggling to pay rent. My case manager has been really helpful, I got his number from a friend. I don’t know what agency he works for but he is so helpful and responsive. He’s helping me with rent.”

“I have a daughter living at my aunt’s house. I’m trying to win her back. It’s hard because I’ve been living in my car for the past four months. I don’t know what I’m going to do now that it’s getting colder.”

“I moved here to be with my dad. Shortly before arriving I ruptured my Achilles; my leg was in a cast so I couldn’t work right away. The money I saved was dwindling. Then I was diagnosed with cancer – I had five surgeries in 2020. I had two part time jobs but was not making enough to get by. Then I got COVID-19 and was hospitalized... I’m not used to needing help, so it’s been hard.”

Methodology

- Data Collection.** Agnew::Beck started by compiling data. This ranged from economic and population data from the U.S. Census Bureau to Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data collected by local providers and shared by the Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness. The numbers offer broad context and emerging trends, although the lack of comprehensive homelessness data reporting remains a challenge for Mat-Su.
- Interviews and Focus Groups.** The research, analysis and recommendations in this report were informed by service providers, partners and people with lived experience in the Mat-Su Borough. We conducted eight focus groups with a total of 56 participants. We also conducted 20 interviews, with a total of 23 participants. In total, we talked to 79 people through interviews and focus groups.
- Steering Committee.** The project was guided by a steering committee. The steering committee included local service providers who assist people experiencing homelessness; it also included partners representing local and state agencies, housing developers and persons with lived experience. The steering committee offered input on emerging findings, helped identify key stakeholders to engage and supported outreach efforts. The steering committee met three times between March and November 2021.
- Final Presentation.** In December 2021, Agnew::Beck facilitated two community presentations to share back the key findings and recommendations. In total, about 100 people attended the meetings.



Flyer to recruit youth with lived experience of homelessness to participate in a focus group



Email invitation and media coverage of the Mat-Su Homelessness Needs Assessment Final Presentation

About the Region

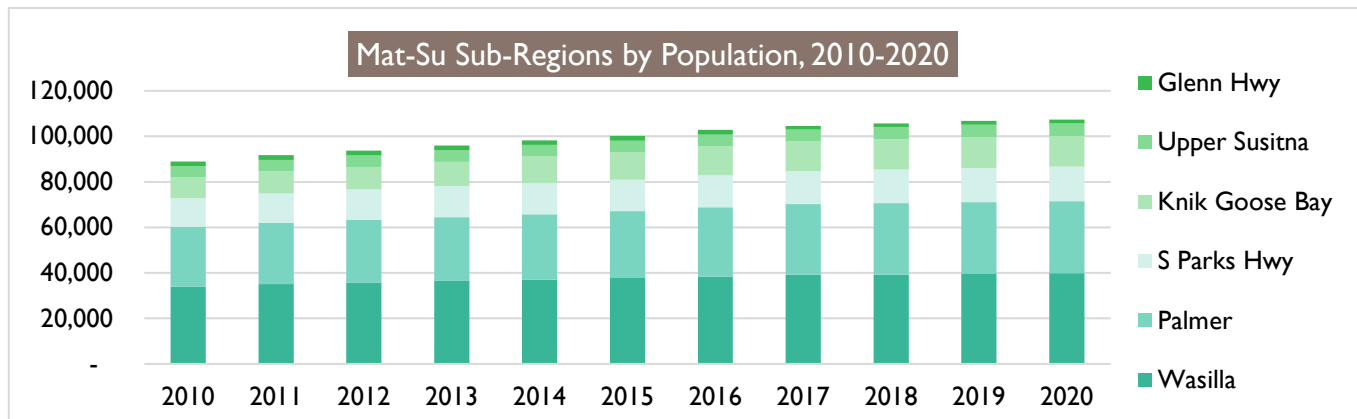
Project Location

This project is focused specifically on homelessness in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su). The Mat-Su covers approximately 24,000 square miles. In 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau counted 107,305 residents of the Mat-Su Borough. The Mat-Su is the fastest growing region of Alaska, and the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development projects continued growth through at least 2045.

The Mat-Su, with its expansive geography and mix of urban and rural areas, is not a monolith. For this reason, we broke the borough up into six sub-regions for much of the data analysis: Wasilla, Palmer, South Parks Highway, Knik Goose Bay, Upper Susitna and Glenn Highway.

Sub-Region Name	Areas Included	Population
Wasilla	Foothills, Seldon, Tanaina, Wasilla, Fishhook, Bogard, South Lakes	39,941
Palmer	Fishhook, Gateway, Palmer, Butte/Lazy Mountain, Farm Loop	31,619
South Parks Highway	Houston, Big Lake, West Lakes, West Meadow Lakes, East Meadow Lakes	15,076
Knik Goose Bay	Fairview, Knik Arm, Point MacKenzie	13,598
Upper Susitna	Western Mat-Su, Talkeetna, Willow, Case, Petersville, Skwentna, Susitna, Trapper Creek	5,448
Glenn Highway	Matanuska River, Buffalo/Soapstone, Chickaloon, Eureka, Glacier View, Lake Louise, Sutton Alpine	1,623
Total population		107,305

Source: U.S. Census, 2020



Source: U.S. Census, 2020

Housing Characteristics of the Mat-Su	Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Mat-Su
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mat-Su has newer housing stock than Anchorage or Fairbanks. • Mat-Su has high rates of home ownership (77%) • Most housing units are single-family homes (84%) • Rent is lower in Mat-Su than statewide averages • More than half of Mat-Su renters are cost-burdened by the amount paid to rent each month • The Mat-Su vacancy rate is the lowest in the state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Property values, average income, educational attainment and even amenities like plumbing and electricity vary significantly by sub-region throughout the borough. • Median income for the Mat-Su overall is \$75,493, lower than Anchorage and Fairbanks. However, much of that wealth is concentrated in areas like Wasilla and Palmer, and immediately adjacent unincorporated communities. Outlying areas of the Mat-Su, such as along the Glenn Highway, have a median income close to half that of Anchorage.

Source: U.S. Census. For more detailed information about the Mat-Su, including sub-regional data and comparisons to Anchorage and Fairbanks, see the slide deck in the appendices.

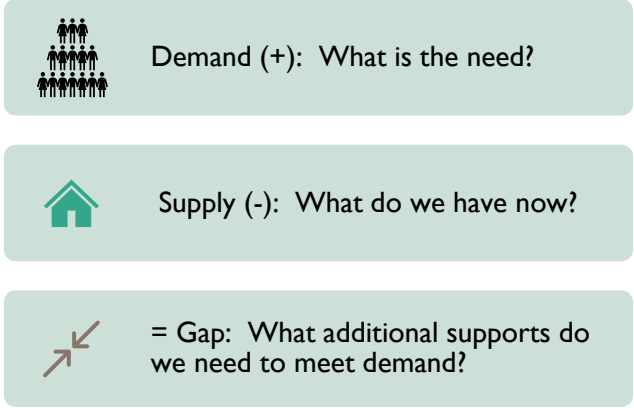
2. Gaps Model

For detailed inputs and assumptions used in the gaps model, see the appendix.

Overview

A key element of this project included the creation of a gaps model to determine whether Mat-Su is meeting the demand for services. The model starts by estimating total demand, or total number of households experiencing homelessness annually in Mat-Su. It then calculates supply, based on the current availability of supportive housing and services. It then compares these two figures to estimate the gap, or unmet need, in the homelessness response system.

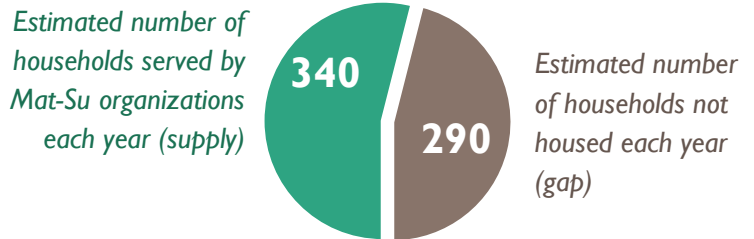
To calculate the **demand**, Agnew::Beck used a comprehensive analysis including inputs from the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) data for Mat-Su, poverty numbers from the U.S. Census and public eviction data. To calculate the **supply**, our team used numbers from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s Housing Inventory Count, supplemented with information directly from Mat-Su providers. To calculate the gap, the model subtracts current supply from overarching demand to identify the unmet need.



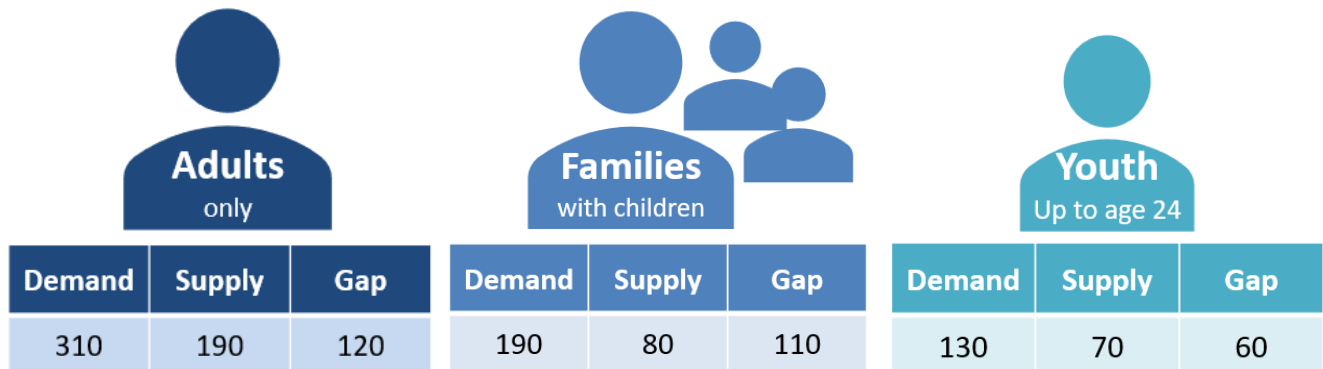
Findings

Overall, the gaps model estimates there are 630 households experiencing homelessness in Mat-Su annually. An estimated 340 of these households are currently being served by Mat-Su organizations, while an estimated 290 households are not being sustainably housed through existing services.

Total: 630 Households Experiencing Homelessness Annually in Mat-Su (demand)



Household Gaps by Population



NOTE: The numbers above show households, not individuals. For the Adults only category, adult couples are counted as one household. The Families with children category includes any household with at least one parent and at least one child. In the “youth” category, all households are households of one, since a parenting youth would be classified in the “families with children” category. The model counts households instead of individuals in alignment with how the data are stored in HMIS.

Gaps by Population and Intervention Type

The gaps model both estimated the total number of households demanding housing services and the type of intervention the household is likely to require. The estimates of which intervention would apply to which population group were provided by trends in local HMIS data, distribution of demand in nearby Anchorage, national best practice and confirmed through local key informant interviews.

The gaps model assumes something very important and clarifying: **what intervention would end homelessness for a household?** There are several services and programs that can work with a household, but not directly lead to stable and affordable housing, and are therefore excluded from the interventions below. For instance, emergency shelter is considered an “access strategy” in the Best Practices appendix. This means that it’s a crucial part of a homeless response system but does not qualify as a housing intervention that ends with a household in stable, long-term housing.

Also, the gaps model table below is specifically considering those households that are literally homeless, meaning they are living on the streets or a place not meant for human habitation. Because of this, the gaps model below does not quantify the number of households whose homelessness could have been prevented each year. It’s possible that the number of households qualifying for a “diversion” intervention could have had their homelessness prevented, if a homeless response system intervened sooner.

To learn more about how households were allocated to the different interventions, see Appendix 4. A definition of each intervention is provided in the Best Practices Appendix 1.

	ACCESS	HOUSING				Total Demand
	Diversion	Rapid Resolution	Transitional Housing	Rapid Rehousing	Permanent Supportive Housing	
Adult-Only	40	30	-50	60	30	120
Families with Children	30	20	20	30	10	110
Youth/Transition-Aged Youth	20	10	-10	20	30	60
TOTAL	90	60	-50	110	70	290

A negative number here suggests the Mat-Su is overprescribed on transitional housing beds and is currently serving clients better fit with a different intervention.

Limitations of the Gaps Model

Having quality data is essential to craft an effective community response to homelessness. Homelessness data in Mat-Su is not centralized in one coordinated data system, which makes it difficult to identify exact population estimates and analyze trends. These numbers should be considered broad estimates. Only some providers are using shared data collection tools like HMIS, which is why this report supplemented the model with publicly available data, such as poverty and eviction data. While the gap numbers are approximate, preliminary reactions from Mat-Su providers confirm these numbers appear consistent with what they see in the community. As data collection and data sharing improves, the estimates in the model can be further refined.

3. Key Findings

Strengths of the Mat-Su Homelessness Response System

Overall, service providers in the Mat-Su have a remarkable track record of working together to find solutions, improve the level of service and find new, innovative ways to approach problems. This is most clearly seen in the youth homelessness response, where providers have developed programs that are respected throughout the state and were repeatedly celebrated during interviews and focus groups. Using HUD Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) funds, the community developed a Mat-Su Coordinated Community Plan to End Youth Homelessness and there is an active Mat-Su Alliance to End Youth Homelessness. Homelessness prevention programs are also successfully connecting vulnerable residents with needed resources to maintain housing. However, much of the collaboration in Mat-Su is happening informally between providers and without shared intake processes, centralized data collection, or a communitywide strategy.

The Mat-Su Coalition on Housing and Homelessness offers a forum for providers to work together on specific efforts such as a warming shelter in winter and an annual one-day Project Homeless Connect. There is a need for expanded work on deeper systems and collaborative solutions. Providers are also working to increase community awareness of homelessness in a region where the issue isn't always visible.

“Our community does a great job at prevention. There are a lot of services set up to assist individuals who are at risk of losing their housing.”

“We’re trying to own our issues and not send people to Anchorage. We used to have to do that more, but I think we’re getting closer to meeting the need.”

“I love seeing our agencies work together. We all have a common goal.”

Misconceptions about Homelessness in Mat-Su

Misconceptions around homelessness remain prevalent in the Mat-Su. In interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to share misconceptions they hear about homelessness. Persons with lived experience also shared what they wish others knew and understood about the experience of homelessness in Mat-Su.

The most common misconceptions shared by participants are that homelessness is a choice and that people experiencing homelessness do not want to receive services.

Additionally, some thought homelessness doesn't exist in the Mat-Su, is very minimal or exclusively the result of people experiencing homelessness in Anchorage moving north to get out of the city.

Some people lack a clear understanding of what homelessness is and are under the impression that people couch-surfing or living in vehicles aren't actually experiencing homelessness.

“No one wants to be homeless. They have no resources, no other options, life hasn't been kind to them. People look at them with such a disgusted, non-interested view. My friend has been looking for a job for 6 months, but they won't accept him because of his history. How is he supposed to make a life for himself when everything and everyone is against him?”

“Rural homelessness looks much different from urban homelessness. In Anchorage it is more visible and easier to count.”

“I was homeless for 5 years, but I have accomplished my goals. I bought a house last year. Just because someone is experiencing homelessness at a specific moment, doesn't mean they will be there forever.”

Areas for Improvement for the Mat-Su Homelessness Response System

Lack of Low-Barrier, Short Term Housing for Households

There are very few locations in Mat-Su where people can seek shelter on a short-term basis to connect with housing and services. Low-barrier, short term shelter is an integral part of a homelessness response system and can serve people who are in crisis, those recently discharged from a medical facility without a place to stay, those waiting on an intake process for another program, or anyone without a current place to sleep.

During the planning process, providers and community members expressed a desire for some sort of short-term, low-barrier shelter option. However, given Mat-Su's vast geography, and the reliance on shelter that is occurring in neighboring Anchorage, many participants expressed concerns about the establishment of a single, large congregate shelter. Providers suggested exploring alternative options and access points that meet the need for low barrier and short-term care without the establishment of a large shelter site. These temporary shelter options would offer households a safe and reliable stay until their crisis resolves or until they are connected with more targeted housing and supportive services available in Mat-Su.

“The more difficult a population is to work with (chronic homelessness, dual diagnosis, etc.), the less likely that they are to get care or to last with programming long-term with existing capacity/models in the Mat-Su.”

“We don't want congregate shelter in the Mat-Su Valley for a number of reasons, but we need somewhere for under 18 clients to go to be able to be triaged and placed with the right service. Otherwise, they will resort to couch surfing and other settings that can be traumatic. Over the past 10 years, we have been unable to find funding for this sort of shelter.”

Limited Availability of Affordable Housing

As the Mat-Su population has grown and southcentral Alaska residents seek more affordable housing alternatives outside of Anchorage, new housing continues to be built in Mat-Su. The Mat-Su has a much younger housing stock compared to Anchorage and Fairbanks.

However, the vast majority (84%) of homes in the region are single-family homes. Building low-income and multifamily homes in the Mat-Su typically requires federal tax credits or other assistance, which is limited in Alaska. As a result, there is a shortage of housing for renters with lower incomes. More than half of Mat-Su renters are cost-burdened¹, and the Mat-Su has the lowest vacancy rate in the state. Just 23% of housing units in the Mat-Su are occupied by renters.

The lack of affordable housing contributes to homelessness in Mat-Su. Developers observe that current rates of low-income housing construction are not keeping pace with demand and without additional interventions and funding, the problem will continue and may even worsen. Addressing homelessness in Mat-Su will require ensuring there is an adequate supply of affordable housing.

“We need more affordable housing in general. You can't work an entry-level job and pay rent. Builders say it doesn't pencil out to build.”

“We need to get ahead of the housing need so we don't end up like California... We need to make sure Mat-Su is keeping up with the need as the community grows.”

“The biggest barrier is that you can get these tax credit programs to work, but there is a limited amount of funds per year, and it doesn't fill the need we have for housing... It will just get worse and worse. You see places outside where people get priced out. I think it would be wise for the state or the city to get involved. There are incentives, such as a 10-year tax break, that the city could do.”

¹American Community Survey 2015-2019 Five-Year Estimates, U.S. Census. A household is cost burdened when it spends 30% or more of its household income on rent. In Mat-Su, 52% of renter households are cost burdened. See the data slides in Appendix 2 for more information.

Some Populations Face Unique Challenges and are Disproportionately Represented in the Homelessness System

Based on a review of Census data and Mat-Su Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data, there are clear disparities in the populations experiencing homelessness in Mat-Su.

- **People with disabilities:** 44% of households experiencing literal homelessness report having a disabling condition.
- **People of color:** the racial composition of people experiencing homelessness in Mat-Su does not match the overall demographics of the region. Alaska Native people and Black people experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness in Mat-Su, while white individuals were underrepresented in the homelessness response system.
- **LGBTQ+ individuals:** In interviews and focus groups, several participants spoke first- and second-hand of LGBTQ+ individuals being discriminated against while attempting to access resources, services and housing in Mat-Su.

“We have done a terrible job at responding to LGBTQ+ people. We do not have the resources to respond to this population... There is discrimination in housing in our community.”

“It’s important to have youth and lived experienced voices in plan design. People with lived experience should be telling us what they need.”

These findings demonstrate a continued need to address issues around access, equity and structural bias in the design and delivery of both existing and new programs and services in Mat-Su.

Lack of a Formal System of Care

Service providers have taken initiative to work together to create a system where the sum is greater than its parts. However, Mat-Su’s homelessness response network is an informal system that is not guided by a comprehensive plan with a formalized leadership structure. Because of this informal nature, providers work closer with some organizations than they do with others.

The patchwork system also creates an environment where some community partners are unaware of the full suite of services available in the borough. Key partners such as transportation and health care providers identified a need for greater collaboration and involvement in the community’s homelessness response. Transportation and health care are not exclusively for people experiencing homelessness but are vital parts of the system and can be entry points to the service network. In interviews and focus groups, some of these providers said they regularly encountered situations where they had a client experiencing homelessness who needed assistance, but the provider did not have enough knowledge of the community services to refer the client.

“Someone came into City Hall asking about housing...I called 7 different services. And was told they don’t qualify. There was no real solution for them.”

“Seems like we have so many people struggling but they don’t know about the resources. Rental relief took me 2-3 months, I didn’t know where to go or where to start.”

A formal system of care creates established point(s) of entry where the client can receive an assessment and referral to the correct service provider that can best meet their unique needs. It also can help identify gaps in the continuum so resources such as funding and staffing can be directed where they are most needed.

Behavioral Health and Substance Use Disorder Supports

Mat-Su lacks a coordinated, trauma-informed system of care for behavioral health. Providers shared they sometimes see clients who are unable to stay in housing because they were unable to access needed case management and wraparound services.

The Mat-Su community has worked hard over the past decade to increase the availability of treatment options for those experiencing substance abuse. However, there remains a need for improved coordination and communication between providers to ensure clients in need are successfully accessing resources.

Mat-Su also has limited crisis care options, although there are efforts underway to expand crisis care in the region, including through the Crisis Now efforts ([learn more here](#)). Implementation of the Crisis Now project will hopefully improve care coordination and establish tools to match individuals with the right level of treatment.

“We have amazing partnerships for substance abuse treatment and find the wait times tolerable, peer support available and most of the time we can get assessments for either behavioral health or substance use disorders within 24 hours. There has to be good communication and coordination of services, but the treatment beds have increased tenfold over the past six years.”

“We need to deal with underlying reasons of why people are homeless. You can put people in housing but if they can’t resolve their other issues, they won’t be able to sustain it.”

“Based on our experience with Bridgeway and the success we are having with a group of hard to house individuals, supportive services on-site is critical to success for some people with substance abuse disorder and/or behavioral health issues. It is not low-cost but the savings over time are there if we are able to keep people housed.”

Geographic Scale of Mat-Su and Transportation Challenges

The Mat-Su is a large and diverse region. Services available in the Mat-Su urban core of Palmer and Wasilla may not be accessible to those in outlying areas, and the relatively low population density limits public transportation options. The large geography also creates challenges that can make it harder for households to meet basic needs such as traveling for groceries, getting to work, and attending appointments. Transportation was repeatedly cited as a barrier for accessing services, and existing transportation support services appear to be underutilized based on conversations with transportation providers.

“Being able to keep people in their home communities feels really important too.”

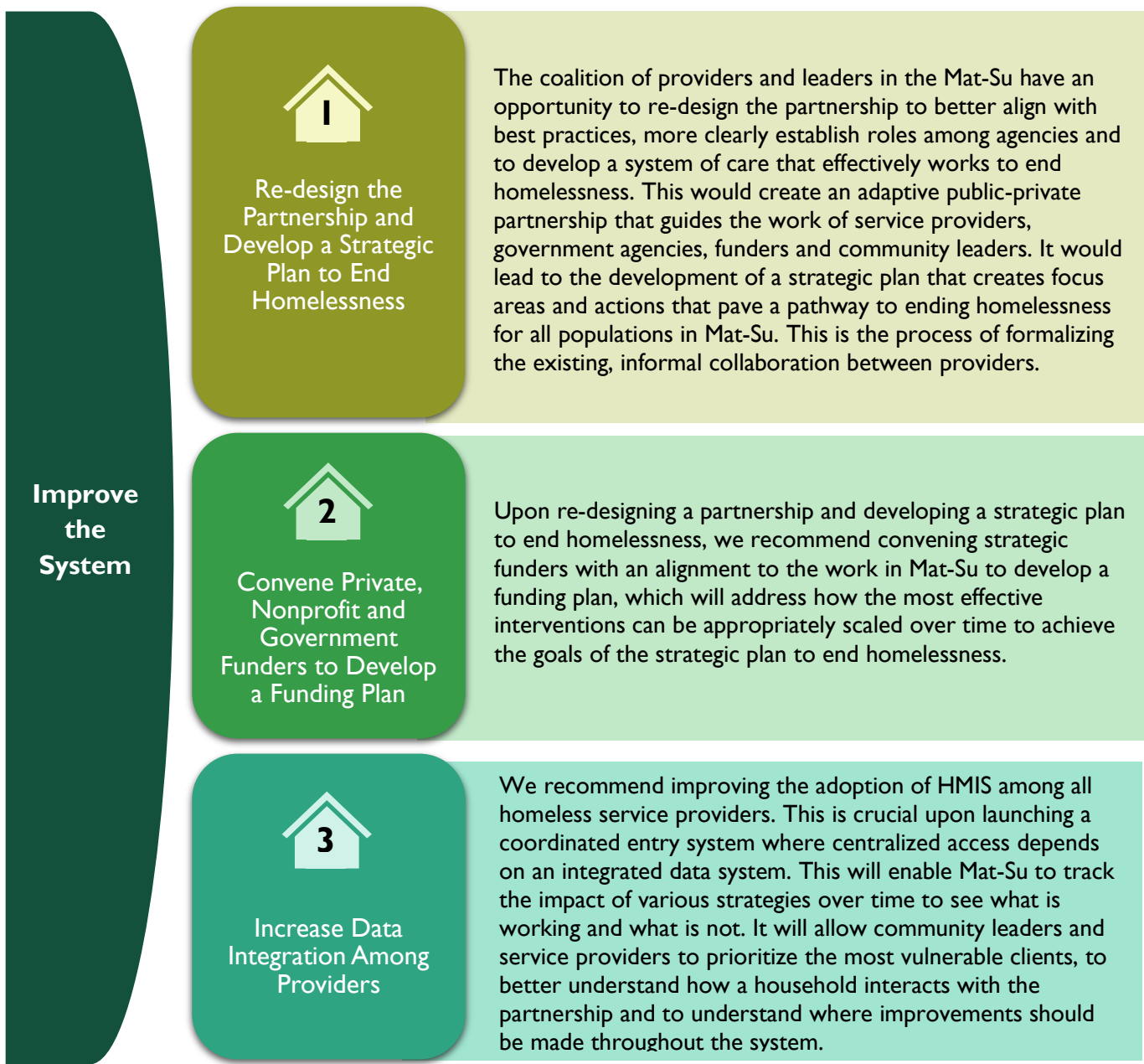
“Last year we had our warming center. The valley is big, so it was difficult to get people there.”

“As transportation providers, we are reaching some of the most remote and hardest to reach parts of the Mat-Su. We can pass on information, help make connections. Right now it feels like all the attention is on Wasilla and Palmer, but there are those experiencing homelessness in other areas.”

4. Recommendations

Through this process, our team developed seven recommended ways to improve the homelessness prevention and response system, broken into two categories. The first category of recommendations, “improve the system,” focuses on creating a stronger network and structure for providers. The second category of recommendations, “fill the gaps,” focuses on how to address holes in the system and ways to increase services.

These recommendations are designed to bring transformational change to how the Mat-Su approaches homelessness. Successful implementation will require engagement and participation from the entire community, including providers, partners, funders, government and residents.



Fill the Gaps



Improve Access for Those Seeking Help

Develop and launch a “coordinated entry” system that centralizes all intake, assessment, and referrals for people in a housing crisis seeking to end their homelessness. Convene stakeholders to determine the best location and service model to shelter high-risk populations on a nightly basis. Having a dedicated place or places where clients know they can go for a warm place to sleep builds trust in the system and increases the likelihood of a client leaving their tent in the winter to make the journey to seek services. This creates reliability within the system while allowing providers to assess clients and refer them to the correct service more efficiently.



Expand Diversion so Fewer People Become Homeless

Diversion is a strategy where the response is tailored to each individual’s current situation and how to divert them from falling into homelessness. Diversion comes in many forms, and sometimes is as simple as assisting someone in discussions with their landlord or calling family members to see if there is a place they can stay for a night or two. We recommend a coordinated system of diversion across all access strategies. This would include an extensive training of all provider staff who work in homeless prevention, accessing care, triage, homeless outreach, or other relevant staff. With a robust diversion program, the Gaps Model indicates an additional 90 Mat-Su households can be diverted from homelessness each year.



Invest in Supportive Housing

Invest heavily in supportive housing programming, such as rapid rehousing (RRH) and permanent supportive housing (PSH) using a Housing First approach. This is subsidized housing paired with wraparound services. This is designed for people who are not candidates for diversion and often have multiple underlying needs that are contributing to being unhoused, such as substance use disorder, medical fragility or behavioral health needs. Based on the Gaps Model, we estimate there is demand to house an additional 180 households per year using supportive housing (RRH, PSH) programs.

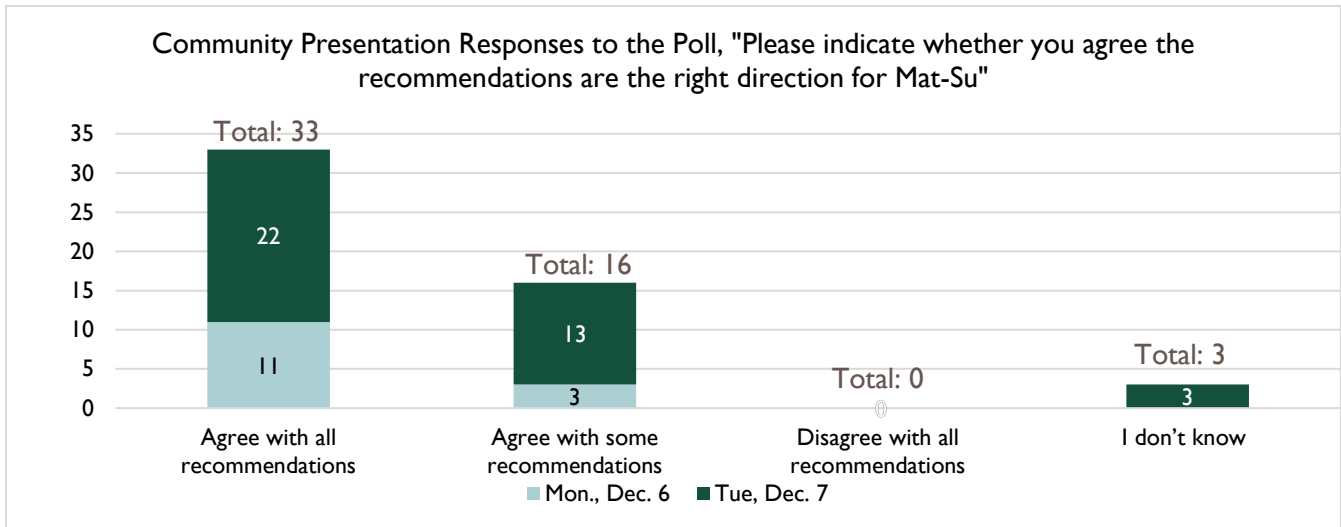


Convene Housing Developers & Property Owners

Ending homelessness requires housing, which means it involves collaboration with people and organizations beyond providers specifically serving people experiencing homelessness. Convening a working group of housing developers, property owners, property managers, service providers, and community leaders will assist in development of a pipeline of supportive housing that designs the pathway to launching multiple permanent supportive housing projects in the Mat-Su over the next decade.

Initial Response to the Recommendations

These recommendations were shared with participants during two virtual community presentations in December 2021. Combined, 52 people participated in a poll soliciting levels of support of the recommendations. Overall, the polls indicate broad support for the recommendations among attendees.



When asked about interest level in involvement of implementation of the plan, 36 participants said they were interested, 17 said they were not interested and three said might be interested.

