



THE BLUEPRINT
TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Homelessness in Polk County

Scale of Homelessness

It is estimated that there are 626 households (more than 700 people) experiencing homelessness on any given night in the Des Moines/Polk County Continuum of Care's (CoC's) geographic area.¹

This point-in-time estimate includes nearly 500 households (about 600 people) staying in shelters and transitional housing programs, and 147 people counted as experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Although not finalized when this plan was published, 2025 Point-in-Time (PIT) numbers show increases in overall and unsheltered homelessness.²

Many more people are identified as experiencing homelessness over the course of a year. During FY 2024 an estimated annual total of 3,194 households (4,017 people) experienced homelessness sometime during the federal fiscal year and were served by the homelessness response system.

More than 300 of these households were families with children and nearly 2,870 were single adult households.

These households represent about 0.8% of the total general population of 505,255 persons from the U.S. Census 2024 estimates for all of Polk County.

Note: Throughout this plan references to Polk County are intended to mean the greater Des Moines metropolitan area, including all municipalities within Polk County.

Key Demographics

A review of demographic data regarding people experiencing homelessness and being served through the homelessness response system in Polk County reveals the following:

- A majority of people experiencing homelessness in Des Moines are single adults, and of those adults, 30% are women, 69% are men, and 1% are either transgender, questioning or of no single gender.
- Single adults who indicate experiencing domestic violence represent 26% of the adult population, but the rate of reported domestic violence nearly doubles for unsheltered families at 50%.
- While Black individuals make up only 11% of the Polk County population, they are overrepresented in the homelessness system, making up 35% of people experiencing homelessness.³



¹The CoC's geographic area includes all of Polk County

²2024 Point-in-Time (PIT) Count, HDX2.0

³FY24 IA-502 LSA Polk County SPM submission to HUD

Overview and Focus of the Plan

To address the needs of these households, the Polk County CoC, led by Homeward, the nonprofit tasked by the community to spearhead homelessness system planning efforts, has adopted **The Blueprint to Address Homelessness** (The Blueprint) to reduce homelessness over the next five years, and chart a path for eventual elimination of all homelessness.

From September 2024 to March 2025, people with lived experiences of homelessness, service providers in the homelessness system, business leaders, elected officials, and other community stakeholders throughout the region developed The Blueprint, shaping its priorities, strategies for improvement, goals, and values.

The Blueprint reflects community-defined priorities for improving services and resources within the homelessness response system and ultimately for achieving better housing and life outcomes for residents who experience homelessness in Polk County. It will be used as a roadmap by system leaders, partners, and stakeholders over the next five years, guiding decision-making, program design, service delivery, and funding efforts.

At its core, The Blueprint emphasizes Improvement Strategies to reduce inflow into the homelessness system, accelerate exits out of homelessness, and build economic self-sufficiency and well-being of people experiencing a housing crisis. The Implementation Strategy of this plan defines how the community actively manages the work, including a reorganization of the homeless oversight system structure, activating a re-organized Homeless Coordinating Council, and launching prioritized strategies within each focus area.

The activation of this Blueprint will require a more effective, comprehensive, actively managed and collaborative homelessness response system – a system that respects and values each person needing

The Blueprint Implementation Strategy Steps

This work will be actively managed by:

- Reorganizing the homeless system oversight structure
- Activating a reorganized Homeless Coordinating Council
- Launching prioritized strategies within each focus area



Leading with Equity and Justice

Equity, justice, and the leadership of people with lived experience of homelessness play key roles in program design, service delivery, funding opportunities, and decision making in the Polk County homelessness response system. In addition to an equity analysis of disparate outcomes among underserved and disadvantaged populations among the System Performance Measures, an equitable response will also focus on the following:

- Equitable representation of people with lived experience of Polk County's homelessness response system and the provision of adequate information and support to ensure that they can serve as full partners within decision-making processes.
- Equitable representation of people of color, youth, LGBTQIA+, and other communities disproportionately impacted by housing instability and homelessness.
- Active engagement of people working in a wide range of staff and leadership roles within the system.

Performance Indicators and Improvement Focus Areas

7 Key Performance Indicators

The Improvement Strategies outlined in The Blueprint aim to reach the following goals for the Polk County homelessness system:

Indicator 1:

Reduction in the number of persons who are homeless.

Indicator 2:

Reduction in the number of persons who become homeless for the first time.

Indicator 3:

Reduction in the length of time persons remain homeless.

Indicator 4:

Increase in the percentage of people who exit to or retain permanent housing.

Indicator 5:

Reduction in the percentage of persons who return to homelessness after exiting to permanent housing.

Indicator 6:

Reduction in the percentage of persons who receive prevention assistance and then subsequently experience homelessness.

Indicator 7:

Increase in the percentage of adults who gain or increase income.

7 Strategic Improvement Focus Areas

To drive progress toward goals, The Blueprint features seven Strategic Improvement Focus Areas centered on system-wide improvements and on strengthening core elements of the homelessness response system:

- 1. Reduce Inflow.** Homelessness prevention is a highly useful and effective strategy for reducing inflow into homelessness systems. By addressing the root causes of homelessness and intervening before people lose their homes, prevention can reduce the overall number of individuals experiencing homelessness and help alleviate the pressures on emergency shelters and other resources.
- 2. Improve Crisis Response Capacity.** Emergency shelters are not just a temporary housing solution; they are an essential component of a larger crisis response and rehousing system aimed at helping people exit homelessness and regain stability, health, and independence.
- 3. End Unsheltered Homelessness.** Reducing unsheltered homelessness is a complex issue requiring Housing First, low-barrier crisis shelter, rapid resolution housing, and permanent supportive housing.
- 4. Accelerate Exits from Homelessness to Stable Housing.** Expansion of specialized housing programs is necessary to address the range of complex, interrelated issues that contribute to homelessness.
- 5. Strengthen Connections to Adjacent Systems.** Institutional partners adjacent to the homelessness system have a critical role to play in identifying and supporting the housing stability needs of people exiting those systems.
- 6. Actively Manage the System for Results.** Achieving high rates of success and impact requires active system management based on real-time, comprehensive, and accurate data. System managers must use data to monitor programming, track outcomes, and inform policy decisions and operational considerations most likely to support system goals.
- 7. Expand Affordable Housing Options.** Public housing agencies and affordable housing developers must work in close collaboration with homelessness systems and other supportive service providers to leverage funding opportunities, reduce barriers to tenant selection, and expand partnerships across all jurisdictions and sectors to expand affordable housing access for people at the lowest levels of income and at highest risk of continued homelessness.

Scan the QR code to view the full plan.

