

# Understanding Homelessness: Frequently Asked Questions

Across our communities, the lack of affordable housing is pushing more individuals and families into homelessness. Rising rents, limited housing options, and economic instability are creating an urgent need for solutions and for understanding. Too often, harmful stereotypes overshadow the real stories and diverse experiences of those without stable housing.

This FAQ aims to challenge common misconceptions, explain the four federal categories of homelessness, and guide you through resources like the Coordinated Entry System, which helps connect people to housing and services. By understanding the realities of homelessness, we can work together toward lasting change.

## What does “homelessness” really mean?

Homelessness doesn't always look how people expect. It includes more than just those living on the street or in shelters. Many individuals and families experiencing homelessness are hidden from view—sleeping in their cars, staying in motels, or doubling up with friends or family. These situations are unstable, unsafe, and lack the dignity everyone deserves.

To stay up to date on the current state of homelessness in Oakland County, visit the Alliance for Housing Oakland's webpages for interactive dashboards or click the links below.

[Community Analysis Dashboard](#)

[Community Snapshot Dashboard](#)

[Community Performance Dashboard](#)

## Why do people become homeless?

There's no single reason. People lose their homes because of job loss, medical crises, domestic violence, rising rents, or family conflict. Mental illness and substance use can be contributing factors, but they are not the only ones—and not everyone who is homeless struggles with these issues.

The truth is most people experiencing homelessness simply cannot afford housing in today's market. Housing costs have far outpaced wages. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, there is no state in the U.S. where a minimum-wage worker can afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent without working multiple jobs.

## What are the different types of homelessness?

HUD (the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) defines four main categories:

1. **Literally Homeless:** Living outside, in a car, or in an emergency shelter, or any place not generally meant for sleeping.
2. **Imminent Risk of Homelessness:** About to lose housing within 14 days with no other options.
3. **Homeless Under Other Federal Statutes:** Includes youth and families who are couch-surfing, doubled up, or staying in motels due to lack of alternatives.
4. **Fleeing Domestic Violence / Human trafficking:** Escaping abuse with no safe housing options.

Many people—especially families—fall into Categories 2 and 3 but go unnoticed and often unserved.

## Isn't homelessness mostly about addiction or mental illness?

This is one of the most persistent myths. While some individuals do face these challenges, most people experiencing homelessness are lacking stable income. They have fallen on hard times and don't have a safety net.

Many are families with children. Others are seniors, veterans, or people with disabilities. They are our neighbors, our fellow community members, and they want what everyone wants: a safe place to live and a fair chance to get back on their feet.

## Are people experiencing homelessness dangerous?

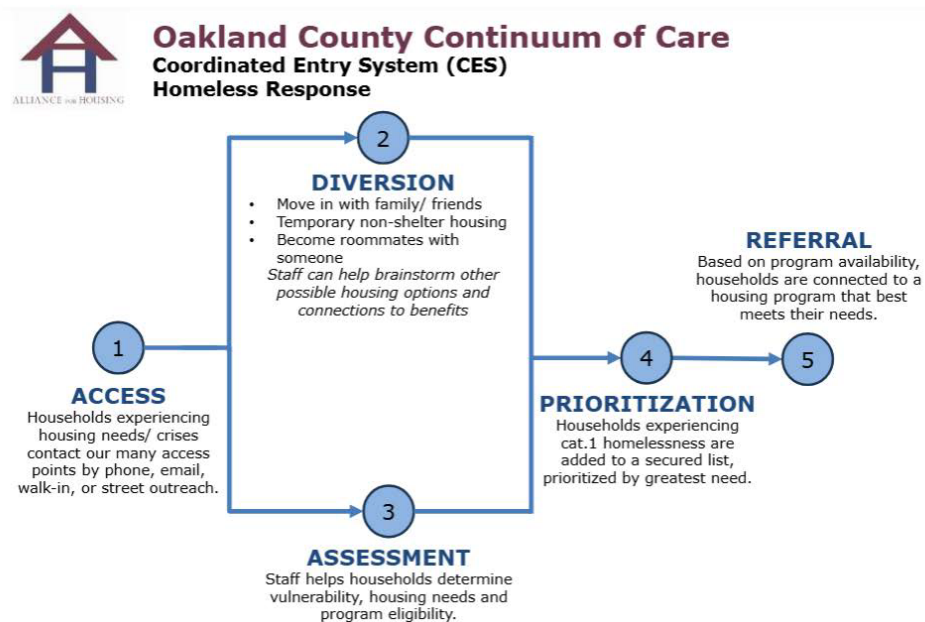
Most are not. People experiencing homelessness are far more likely to be victims of violence than to cause it. Like anyone else, they want to feel safe, be treated with dignity, and live without fear. Labeling all unhoused individuals as dangerous creates stigma and divides communities instead of solving problems.

## How do people in Oakland County access help?

In Oakland County, people can access the homeless response system through **Coordinated Entry**. This is the front door to services and support.

To get help, individuals call Community Housing Network at 248-269-2335 or text “housing” to 248-269-1335. Trained specialists connect people with housing programs, shelters, case management, and other services.

Coordinated Entry System ensures that help is distributed fairly and based on need. It’s not first-come, first-served, but prioritized based on vulnerability and urgency.



## How do people access shelter?

Alternatively, there are ways for people to access shelter outside of the Coordinated Entry System. Alliance for Housing Oakland paired with community partners to create a website called [Shelter Oakland](#) that allows users to search for available shelter beds and receive notifications about bed availability by signing up through the "Apply" link.

## Why don't people just “get a job”?

Many people experiencing homelessness already work—often full-time. But wages haven’t kept up with housing costs. Others may face barriers such as lack of transportation, a criminal record, or health issues.

The reality is, without stable housing, it’s incredibly difficult to maintain employment. Housing is the foundation that allows people to recover, work, and thrive.

## Isn't the system designed to prevent homelessness?

Unfortunately, no. Most funding is geared toward helping people once they've already lost their homes. There is very limited support for those at risk of losing housing, even though early intervention would cost less and cause less harm.

## What is happening in our community to help?

Multiple organizations serve people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Oakland County. Some services include:

- Emergency Shelter
- Emergency rental assistance
- Housing search and landlord mediation
- Housing Case management
- Permanent supportive housing
- Outreach and education
- Advocacy for systems change
- Other as needed

We also use evidence-based practices, like the Critical Time Intervention model, to help people find housing and stay housed. Shelter diversion is another important strategy; helping people in a housing crisis identify safe, immediate alternatives to entering shelter whenever possible. By connecting individuals to resources, mediation, and short-term support, community partners can play a vital role in preventing homelessness before it happens.

## What are Housing Choice Vouchers and how do I get one?

### How can I help make a difference?

#### 1. **Learn and share**

Talk to friends, family, and colleagues. Understanding the facts is the first step in changing minds and policies.

#### 2. **Donate**

Financial support helps provide housing, basic needs, and case management for those in crisis. Every dollar helps us reach more people.

#### 3. **Advocate**

Contact your elected officials and ask them to fund homelessness prevention, housing vouchers, and McKinney-Vento programs for youth.

#### 4. **Volunteer or partner**

Whether assembling care kits, offering your time, or engaging your church or civic group, there's a role for everyone.

### **Why does this matter?**

When people have safe, stable housing, our whole community benefits. Schools perform better. Emergency service costs go down. Neighborhoods thrive. And above all, we uphold the values of dignity, responsibility, and compassion.

### **Sources:**

- [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#)
- [National Alliance to End Homelessness \(endhomelessness.org\)](#)
- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (usich.gov)
- [Community Housing Network blog](#) and [internal program materials](#)
- [Second Wave Media article on hidden homelessness](#)