



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recognizing many challenges related to homelessness and housing instability, in Section 6 of House Bill 1277 (HB 1277, see Appendix A for text of relevant section) the Washington State Legislature tasked the William D. Ruckelshaus Center (the Center, see Appendix B) with gathering information and facilitating discussions to inform a long-term state strategy to create pathways to housing security. The Center, in turn, partnered with Washington State University’s Division of Governmental Studies and Services (DGSS).

Specifically, the purpose set forth by the Legislature was to:

- ◆ explore and identify trends affecting and policies guiding the housing and services provided to individuals and families who are, or at risk of, homelessness in Washington State; and
- ◆ facilitate meetings and discussions to develop options and recommendations for a long-term strategy and implementation steps to improve services and outcomes for persons at risk of or experiencing homelessness and to develop pathways to permanent housing solutions.

The Center and DGSS released reports on the status of those tasks in December 2021 and December 2022. This report, in companionship with the “Status of Fact-Finding, Year 3” report presents a cumulative narrative of those tasks, as well as work completed in 2023, and is also intended to meet the final reporting requirement described in HB 1277, Section 6. The project team will be available for follow-up conversations and project dissemination through June 2024.

Facilitated Discussions

The Center invited and facilitated conversations among hundreds of individuals with knowledge of and experience related to housing and homelessness across geographies, sectors, and roles (See Appendix C for list of project participants). Themes emerging from early discussions informed the development of emerging options, opportunities, and concerns. Further facilitated discussions helped articulate guiding principles and refine emerging options into recommendations, including ways to guide investment decisions and ways to assess whether those investments are contributing to the desired results.

Participants, over the course of this project, have reinforced, deepened, and expanded upon the elements put forth in HB 1277, Section 6. This project has not been an audit nor an evaluation of the numerous entities working to meet the needs of individuals and families experiencing

homelessness and/or housing instability. Nor has this work been an evaluation of the many strategies in place to guide that work. While participants reflected on the past and current context, their conversations focused on where to go next: on shaping a scaffold for decision-making and identifying priority action areas needed both acutely and over time, rather than on detailed tactical solutions.

More details on the Center’s approach to iterations of facilitated discussions, to participant outreach, and to coordinating with other existing efforts are described in “Approach to Facilitated Discussions: 2021-2023.”

Landscape of Housing Security

Housing needs are often defined in broad categories, such as emergency shelter, transitional housing, or subsidized housing. However, most participants described housing as a continuum, and effective programs or policies in any of the categories ultimately depend on others. For example, temporary housing serves its function well when longer-term housing and appropriate supports are available and accessible.

This report takes a holistic view of the landscape of housing security, first by providing an overview of the current trends of homelessness and housing instability, then the myriad of investments, entities, and actors engaged in the response to housing insecurity. This section also provides an overview of policy trends and court rulings shaping the housing security landscape. A deeper dive into factors affecting the rates and trends of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness is presented in the “Status of Fact-Finding – Year 3” report produced by DGSS. That analysis highlights county variations in key factors that affect the rates of homelessness over time, as well as an overview of service evaluations—which highlight the importance of aligning resources with the unique needs of people.

Foundational Themes for a Long-Term Strategy

As a precursor to identifying options and recommendations for a long-term strategy, HB 1277, Section 6 called for discussions to gather information about factors that contribute to homelessness and housing instability; statutory and regulatory issues; other concerns, barriers, and opportunities; and desired principles.¹

Participants provided a range and depth of perspectives on these issues. Foundational themes and components of a coherent, effective, and widely accepted long-term effort include:

¹ Sections (2)(c)(i) and (c)(ii) also called for fact-finding on these topics. That work was carried out by the project team from the Washington State University Extension’s Division of Governmental Studies and Services through literature review and analyses of publicly available data (reported separately in 2022 and 2023). Points of intersection in the topics, finding, and themes between that work and the Center’s facilitated discussions are noted throughout this report.

- ◆ **Understanding the causes of homelessness and housing instability**—as multiple, often co-occurring contributing factors, rather than seeking to identify a short list of “root causes.”
- ◆ **Recognizing the complexity of housing security**—that a wide range of services are relevant and needed, but are also implemented in various settings, by practitioners from many disciplines, funded through multiple governmental and nongovernmental sources, and operating under the management or regulatory oversight of a myriad of agencies with varying policies, incentives, and constraints.
- ◆ **Matching the response to the needs**—current programs and available resources do not match the scale of people experiencing homelessness and housing instability or their varied needs of the current moment.
- ◆ **Tending to the complex aspects of the response**—shifting the conversation from opposing choices can bring the conversation towards what would be a productive balance between and among seemingly conflicting ideas, such as flexibility and consistency.
- ◆ **State partnership with Tribal Governments**—and with Urban Indian Organizations to meet the specific housing needs of tribal citizens and communities is a foundational component of a state effort to advance housing security.

More discussion and detail can be found in “Foundational Themes and Components” in Section 4 of this report.

Conceptual Shifts for a Long-Term Strategy

Building on the foundational themes, participant discussions also illuminated three conceptual shifts to incorporate in a long-term effort. Mindsets shape the actions and initiatives developed to address homelessness and housing insecurity. Participants emphasized that the underlying mindsets, or ways of thinking, need to change in order to enhance success and make progress towards advancing pathways towards housing security.

- ◆ **Shift to a holistic understanding of multiple contributing factors to housing insecurity and homelessness**—to be comprehensive and useful, a strategy cannot seek to address some factors and exclude others. Instead, a strategy will need to grapple with multiple structural factors and individual vulnerabilities and how they interact with each other.
- ◆ **Shift to a shared aspirational future**—to break down silos and build more intentional connections across the entire housing security landscape.
- ◆ **Shift to relationships of support, alignment, and coordination**—to foster incentives, relationships, and adaptive learning to ensure stable individuals, communities, and systems.

Guiding Principles

Guiding principles help align decisions and actions to the goal of advancing housing security. They serve to guide ongoing decision-making about actions to advance housing security; serve across levels and sectors—for strategy, policy, program design, service provision, and for local, regional, and state; help navigate aspects of the response that can seem to be contradictory and reduce adversarial approaches to finding solutions; and create conditions that balance flexibility for different parts of the complex response to housing insecurity with consistency for the response as a whole. Taken together, guiding principles contribute to a comprehensive approach to advancing housing security.

- Guiding Principle A:** Foster productive narratives around housing security and homelessness.
- Guiding Principle B:** Mobilize a multi-sector response to advance housing security.
- Guiding Principle C:** Respond to the holistic and interdependent nature of housing security.
- Guiding Principle D:** Design the response to housing insecurity around what people and communities need to thrive.
- Guiding Principle E:** Undo the harm of structural racism and other forms of systemic disadvantage that produce housing inequity.
- Guiding Principle F:** Employ a sense of urgency about both meeting immediate needs and initiating steps for long-term progress.
- Guiding Principle G:** Amplify the influence of those most affected by homelessness and housing instability.
- Guiding Principle H:** Create conditions that reduce competition and facilitate cooperation.
- Guiding Principle I:** Address the inability of the housing market to meet housing needs.
- Guiding Principle J:** Sustain the response to housing insecurity through stability in infrastructure, relationships, and appropriately scaled resources.
- Guiding Principle K:** Prepare to adapt to changing circumstances, unanticipated disruptions, and new knowledge.

Recommendations and Opportunities for Sustained Progress Towards Housing Security

Section 6 of HB1277 called for facilitated discussions to inform options and recommendations for a long-term strategy, including clarity on roles and responsibilities, and considerations of the manner in which investments should be made.

The following recommendations were developed and informed by the knowledge and expertise of a myriad of individuals with knowledge or experience of programs and policies related to homelessness and housing instability, and by the project team's experience in supporting collaborative efforts. Recommendations and opportunities are organized in the following categories:

- ◆ opportunities for State partnership with Tribal Governments;
- ◆ set the strategy up for success;
- ◆ respond to the continuum of housing needs;
- ◆ respond holistically to people's needs;
- ◆ bolster systems and workforce capacity and stability; and
- ◆ foster accountability and manage performance, and adapt over time.

Collectively, these recommendations embody actions in a more holistic approach to housing security, where entities and actors consider the common set of guiding principles described in this report. The following recommendations provide guidance for the State—the Legislature, Office of the Governor, and agencies—to lead and encourage a more coordinated framework; and for entities and organizations across sectors and levels to adopt conceptual shifts and guiding principles, in the actions they take according to their roles.

Opportunities for State Partnership with Tribal Governments

The State of Washington and federally recognized tribes have government to government relationships and these relationships recognize and respect the sovereignty of the other. Within that context, this section presents themes emerging from participant conversations for how the State could better partner with tribal governments in a long-term effort to advance housing security.

Set the Strategy up for Success

Recommendation 1

Multiple Successes: Recognize multiple, co-existing ways of understanding success.

Recommendation 2

Clarity of Total Investment and Benefit: Capture and communicate the comprehensive investments that advance housing security, the benefits they yield, and for whom.

Recommendation 3

Experiential Expertise: Amplify the insights and expertise of those affected by homelessness and housing instability by supporting them to participate in making decisions about, implementing, and assessing the performance of laws, policies, programs, and services related to housing insecurity.

Respond to the Continuum of Housing Needs

Recommendation 4

Housing Options: Expand the supply, variety, location, and quality of supported options and pathways for shelter, temporary, and longer-term housing, to better match people to their types and level of need and to their preferences.

Recommendation 5

Supply of Affordable Housing: Adopt strategies that align homelessness services and housing assistance with increasing the supply of affordable housing for rental and ownership. Allocate more funds to be used for operations and maintenance to preserve the current stock of subsidized and affordable housing.

Recommendation 6

Equitable Access to Housing: As policies are implemented to increase the supply of affordable housing, ensure equitable access for those transitioning from homelessness and most at risk of housing instability.

Recommendation 7

Geographic Variability: Accommodate the ways in which housing challenges manifest differently in different places.

Key actions include:

Local Affordability: Allow local communities to determine what is considered affordable housing and fair market pricing based on their local economic conditions.

Local Affordable Housing Solutions: Support local rental property owners and local builders/developers with risk mitigation and tailored incentives to participate in sustaining a robust stock of high-quality local affordable housing.

Recommendation 8

Cooperation Across Jurisdictions: Incentivize greater cooperation across geographic and political jurisdictions.

Respond Holistically to People's Needs

Recommendation 9

Coordinated Pathway: Create a coordinated pathway system that cultivates operational connections among entities working on outreach, entry into the homelessness response system, placement in housing, and longer-term housing stability.

Key actions include:

Infrastructure for Coordination: Directly support the infrastructure and effort required for active coordination and sustained relationships among local implementing organizations.

State and Local Engagement: Increase engagement across state and local levels to clarify policies, practices, and criteria for coordinated systems.

Recommendation 10

Holistic Eligibility: Reconfigure eligibility criteria using a cross-sector, multifactorial, periodic assessment designed to help people access the supports they need over time to synergistically stabilize their housing, health, behavioral health, and socioeconomic circumstances.

Key actions include:

Income Eligibility Gap: Supplement housing assistance eligibility beyond federal income limits to compensate for the locally disproportionate mismatch between household income and housing costs.

Income Eligibility Cliff: Extend housing assistance eligibility to replace binary thresholds with a sliding scale to help people gradually transition to housing stability as their socioeconomic stability also gradually improves.

Recommendation 11

Person-Centered Navigation: Evolve current case management and care navigation efforts into a cross-sector navigation system that responds to the specific needs of individuals and households and follows them longitudinally as those needs evolve.

Recommendation 12

Circumstances of Precarious Housing: Expand investments that stabilize individuals or households with circumstances of precarious housing.

Key actions include:

Bridging Support: Provide bridging grants or loans for unanticipated expenses that may supersede making rent or mortgage payments on time.

Eviction Mitigation: Shift from policies that merely prohibit eviction to add comprehensive prevention strategies that mitigate the reasons for and impacts of impending eviction for tenants, neighbors, and property owners/managers.

Bolster Systems and Workforce Capacity and Stability

Recommendation 13

Diversity in Implementation: Increase the diversity of and cooperation among organizations and entities in the public, nonprofit, and private sector with the potential to contribute to the response to housing insecurity.

Recommendation 14

Financial Stability of Implementers: Foster the financial stability of those implementing the response to housing insecurity by offering a range of funding models to variety of grantees and partners.

Recommendation 15

Working Conditions: Improve working conditions and supports for the frontline workers who directly provide homeless services and housing assistance.

Recommendation 16

Core Competencies: Establish universal core competencies in culturally responsive, anti-racist, and trauma-informed practices for providers, administrators, and leaders across sectors, and regularly provide the training needed to put those competencies into practice.

Foster Accountability, Manage Performance, and Adapt Over Time

Recommendation 17

Alignment of Policymaking: Assess laws and policies in all areas of government for the potential to affect housing security and assess housing laws and policies for their potential to affect interrelated goals in other areas.

Key actions include:

Policy Coordination: Support closer coordination among those who set and implement policies for interdependent forms of assistance within and across levels of government.

Alignment with Poverty Reduction Strategies: Cooperate to implement strategies that mutually reduce poverty and housing insecurity.

Recommendation 18

Knowledge Management Framework: Develop a comprehensive framework for the role of knowledge and learning in the State's efforts to advance housing security, including performance monitoring, focused evaluation, a prioritized research agenda, and avenues for knowledge sharing.

Key actions include:

Diversity of Knowledge: Draw on complementary sources of information to design, implement, and monitor policies, programs, and services.

Connect Research and Practice: Create opportunities for dialogue and cooperation among the research and evaluation communities and the policy and practice communities.