

Locked Out: Homelessness in Long Beach

In July 2022, Long Beach released the results of its first homelessness count in two years. The results were shocking, but not surprising: The city saw a 62% rise in the number of people living on the streets or in other places not meant for permanent habitation.

The numbers were released in the backdrop of election season, and as we were conducting surveys and smaller focus group discussions with residents, we knew that homelessness was at the top of the public's mind. A survey we conducted, as well as outside surveys, showed it was in fact the No. 1 issue voters cared about and wanted candidates to address by more than a two-to-one margin: When asked to describe the most important issues facing Long Beach, the top answers were homelessness (45%), crime (20%) and housing (10%).

As we approached this topic, we carefully considered what would have the most impact. One fact stuck out during our research: During roughly the same time period as homelessness numbers rose, the city was receiving a record amount of federal, state and county funding—about \$93 million—to address the problem, much of which came from COVID-19 relief funds.

We decided to organize our project around an examination of that funding and how effective the city's programs had been. The result was *Locked Out: Homelessness in Long Beach*, which included stories and videos about the abrupt end of the city's Project Roomkey program, which left dozens of homeless individuals with nowhere to go; an examination of the emergency housing voucher program and how well the city had supported those looking to use them; the effects of homelessness on Downtown businesses, and how the city failed to support these business owners; an examination of the city's homeless court program and how it compares to other similar courts; how well the city had managed a contract with motel owners to provide vouchers for stays; and an investigation into how effective the mental health care system has been.

The public impact of this series has been immense:

- Following our story about the condition of motels where homeless individuals were being housed using vouchers, a councilmember on Dec. 6 asked the city manager for a report on how these contracts were being managed.
- The city established a joint information center to centralize—and clamp down on—communication after sources within the health department and other departments spoke with us candidly about the success of various programs.
- City officials organized a meeting with Downtown restaurant owners who told us they would close up shop if officials didn't do more to address the problem of homelessness and crime.
- Shortly after taking office in January, the city's new mayor pushed to declare a state of emergency over homelessness.

- The new mayor created an executive level political position: a deputy mayor for housing and homeless to oversee his office's varied efforts to address the crisis.

Community and readership support for our coverage has been resounding as well. Although the Long Beach Post is a for-profit news organization, we partnered with the Local Media Foundation to open fiscal sponsorship around project-specific, tax deductible fundraising so donors could directly support our reporting on homelessness.

The time-limited fundraising effort successfully raised thousands of dollars from dozens of readers and supporters, directly supporting our homeless coverage in 2022. The effort was so successful, receiving such resounding public support that we have again partnered with the LMF to reopen a fund in 2023 to support ongoing fundraising for our homeless coverage.