



Date: June 28, 2021

To: Homeless Plan Advisory Committee (HPAC)

From: Emily Roots, Department of Housing Services, Public Affairs Administrator

Subject: Make Inclusive Language Choices in Communicating our Work: Homeless and Houseless

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## **Background**

The Homeless Plan Advisory Committee (HPAC) recently discussed the complexities of the evolving language around homelessness and requested follow up communication about this topic from staff. In recent years, the term “houseless” in place of “homeless” has become more common to recognize that while people experiencing housing instability may not have a house, there are many definitions and understandings of home. However, people with lived experience of housing instability have different and varied perspectives around the correct terms to use, and all perspectives are valid.

Just as no group of people can be neatly packaged within a single identity, the same is true for people experiencing homelessness. It is important for our programs to be receptive to and focused on serving people with this lived experience.

## **How do we Talk about the Work of Housing & Homeless Services?**

While a clean cut answer and one preferred term might seem like a quick fix, it is not up to the HPAC or the Department of Housing Services to determine an absolute answer to the question of how do we talk about homeless programming and people living with out housing. Many of our federal programs use verbiage with Homeless/Homelessness in the title. Some of our partners in direct service have moved towards using Houseless/Houselessness. There is a spectrum of people with this lived experience, who each have their own unique perspective and preference.

Our staff recommendation is to embrace a both/and approach where we are prepared to use many different terms to better encapsulate and explain individuals’ experiences, during what is likely one of the most challenging and difficult times in their life. While it can be clunky, being intentional in using person first language (i.e. Person Experiencing...) is also important to center the individual.

On a broader level, it is important to not lose the larger message in this conversation that investments in affordable housing and homeless or houseless services creates housing stability. With the dramatic increase in rent prices in our community and the limited resources available for social services, the need to invest in solutions is greater than ever. By investing in these solutions, we give our neighbors and community members the tools to stay in housing if they are precariously housed and transition into housing if needed. The crucial message focuses on investing in solutions, compassion, and dignity for our fellow community members.

Below are some different ways to communicate about the kinds of households our programs aim to serve to help shift language depending on the context of your communication:

- People Experiencing Houselessness OR People Experiencing Homelessness
- People living without housing
- People who are sleeping in their cars
- People who are Sleeping Outside / Sleeping on the Street or without shelter
- Seniors on fixed incomes who can't afford to keep up with rising rents
- Youth who don't have a safe place to stay at night
- Working families who lost everything
- People living with disabling conditions who need extra supports to be successful in housing

Please note language evolves over time, often as people recognize the problematic nature of certain words and phrases. This will likely not be the last time language evolves and adapts to discuss the challenges of homelessness and we encourage staff and volunteers to be receptive to future verbiage that may be more appropriate to describing this experience.

